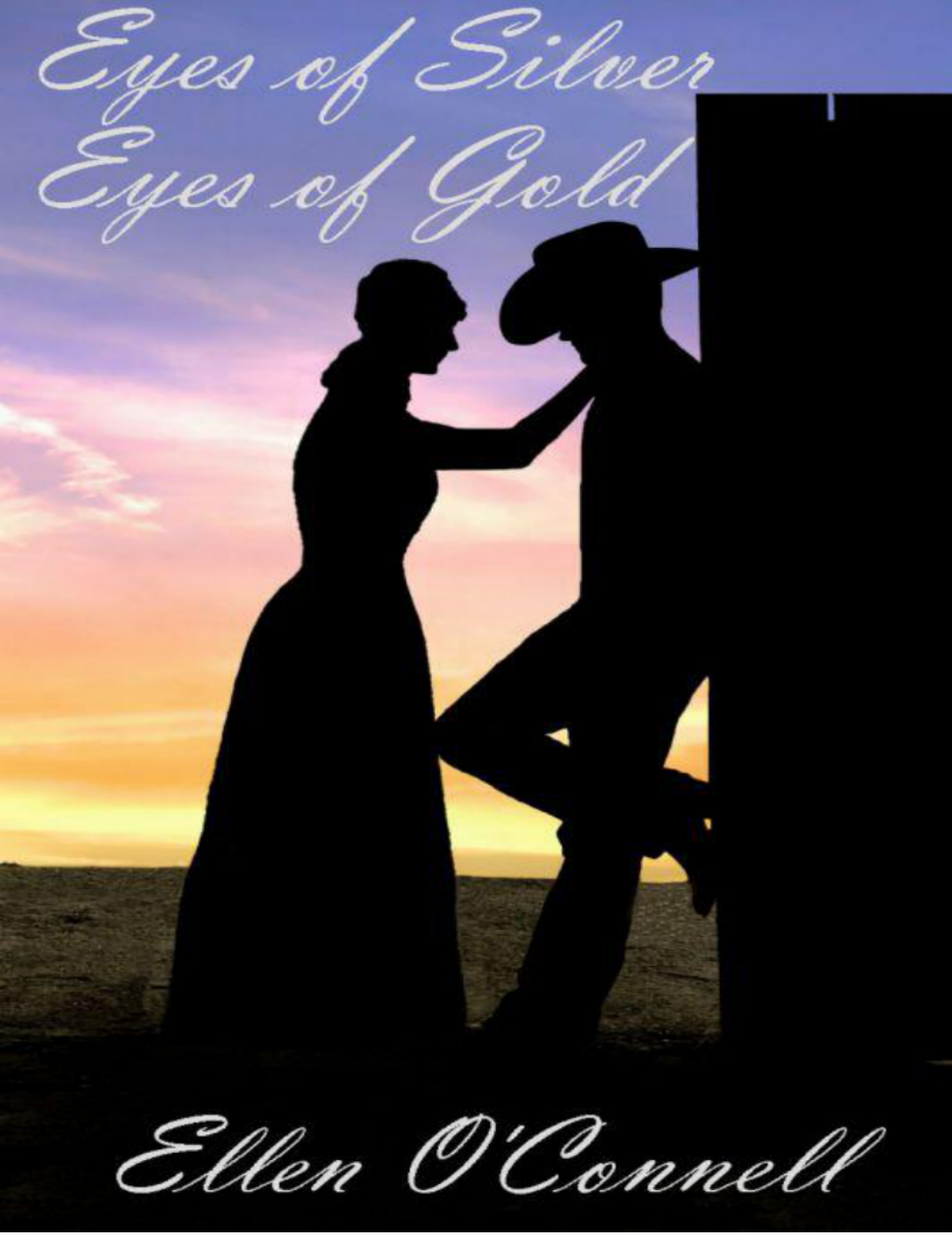

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EYES OF SILVER, EYES OF GOLD

by

Ellen O'Connell

SMASHWORDS EDITION

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* * *

DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to my sister, Elizabeth, who issued the challenge that made me stop talking about writing a book, and write one - this one.

* * *

STORY SUMMARY

EYES OF SILVER, EYES OF GOLD is a story of family conflicts set in Colorado in 1885.

Anne Wells has embarrassed her rigidly proper family since she was a child with occasional but grievous lapses from ladylike behavior. They blame those lapses for the disgraceful fact that she is a spinster at twenty-eight.

Cord Bennett, the son of his father's second marriage to a Cheyenne woman, is more than an embarrassment to his well-to-do family of ranchers and lawyers - they are ashamed and afraid of their black sheep.

When Anne and Cord are found alone together, her father's fury leads to violence. Cord's family accepts that the fault is his. Can Anne and Cord use the freedom of being condemned for sins they didn't commit to make a life together? Or will their disapproving, interfering families tear them apart?

* * *

Anne's fear was all-pervasive, mind-numbing, a greedy serpent coiled in her stomach, hungrily devouring all strength and will. It changed the world from a wondrous place full of color and warmth to a cold, airless box done in shades of lifeless gray. As the effects of the laudanum wore off, Anne sat in hopeless silence, trying to defend against her father's triumphant boasting with the stony demeanor **he** *used so well.*

"He won't even miss you, you know. He doesn't give a damn about you. A few days, and you'll never cross his mind again."

Anne wondered if the anguish in her mother's eyes reflected her own, if she looked as dreadful as her mother, who had aged twenty years in the past hours. She stared out the train window, watching the windswept prairie speeding by. The sound of the train's wheels marked the miles and beat out a rhythm: It's your fault, it's your fault, it's your

fault.

"If you think his family will do anything, you're wrong. Once they know their own blood isn't involved, they won't care any more than he does."

Fear flooded Anne's mind again in a black tide, bringing at least a respite from the constant barrage of victorious gloating.

One year. One year and a few weeks. That was all there had been, all there was ever to be. It was over now, ending the way it began, with pain and fear and blood.

* * *

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Chapter 1

DAMP AND SHIVERING, ANNE fought against waking, tried to shut out the sounds of nickering horses, lowing cows, and plaintive cats. As she curled in a tighter ball, stalks of hay pricked her cheek, and the summer sweet scent rose around her. She came fully awake in a dismaying rush.

Last night this barn had been a welcome refuge from the storm, but she had only intended to wait out the rain. Now the gray light of early dawn might mean having to explain herself to the barn's owner. Maybe, just maybe, she could steal away before anyone saw her. Anne forced her stiff body into a sitting position then gasped. A shadowy figure leaned against the wall, watching her.

Cord Bennett. In the dim light in the barn it should have been impossible to identify anyone, but Anne recognized him instantly from a glimpse of his eyes under the brim of his hat. She stared up in disbelief. How long had he been standing there, watching her sleep? Unwilling to babble a nervous apology, Anne sat in the hay, returning his silent, steady regard, but she could not stop the voices echoing in her head.

"His daddy had brown eyes, but those eyes of his are yellow, yellow like a wolf's."

"The color don't make no nevermind. What tells you he's the devil's own is there's nothing behind those eyes. They're empty, empty, savage, and cold."

Which was ridiculous, of course. Those gossips were wrong. Maybe Cord did have unusual light brown eyes, but Anne did not find them cold. In fact, though she was chilled to the bone, meeting those eyes had something to do with the heat she could feel flushing her face and burning steadily downward.

Her mind filled in the features she could not distinguish in the shadows. Under the hat his hair was thick, black, and probably almost touched his collar. The bronze face was all angles and planes, honed to the point of gauntness, with well-arched eyebrows and cheekbones so high they gave the eyes some of their narrowed look. The square jaw and firm-lipped mouth completed a face that was not merely strong, but fierce.

Just looking at Cord Bennett made brave men uneasy, but Anne felt herself relaxing. She had first met Cord when they were both only ten years old, and although everyone she knew believed the polite boy had grown into a dangerous man, she could not abandon her childhood impression. She was reassured by his presence, not frightened.

The long silence was becoming awkward, so she ventured, "Good morning."

"Mornin'." His voice was deep, soft, and as expressionless as his face.

"I suppose you wonder what I'm doing here in your barn?"

"You as cold and wet as you look?"

Glancing down at herself, Anne could not control a shudder of self-disgust, but she answered simply, "Yes."

"House is warm. There's coffee." He picked up a pitchfork and lifted part of her bed. "Be almost an hour before I'm done here."

Coffee! Warmth and coffee! Add a bit of food to that and it would be as much of heaven as anyone could ask for on this earth.

As Cord disappeared into the shadowy depths of the barn, Anne scrambled to her feet and hurried outside. Across the yard a dark red house with a roofed porch trimmed in white nestled among cottonwoods that were now dropping the last of their shining, yellow leaves. The day would be bright and sunny, but a steady breeze exaggerated the morning's chill, hastening Anne's dash for the house.

She halted in surprise just inside the door. White walls, pine floors, and large windows made a sunny interior that all but invited her in. The front part of the room was a small parlor. A spindle-backed rocking chair flanked a lamp table. A worn settee was pushed against one wall as if to keep it out of the way. Books that looked worn from many readings filled shelves beside it.

The back part of the room was the kitchen, and the large black stove pulled at Anne like a magnet. Not only was it the source of the warmth she sought, but the coffee pot sat on top.

Taking off her muddy shoes, Anne hung her damp fascinator on one of pegs by the door. She eyed a heavy blue wool shirt hanging there for long seconds before giving way to temptation and exchanging her soggy coat for the shirt. Surely a man who freely offered hot coffee would not begrudge the use of his shirt for a while.

A moment's rummaging on shelves near the stove produced a thick white mug. With a sigh of pure pleasure, Anne collapsed into one of the chairs at the table in the kitchen. She wrapped the wool shirt tightly around her, tucked her damp, stockinged feet up into the warmth of her skirts, and took the first lovely swallow of the strong, hot brew. Cradling the cup in her hands, more comfortable than she had been in some time, Anne tried to think how she could get Cord to help her.

Such thoughts made her absently touch her hair, then start as her fingers found not just straggling locks, but a dry grass stem.

Startled, she began combing through the thick mass with her fingers, pulling out and pocketing hairpins and more bits of hay as she went.

Across the room Anne saw her muddy shoes, high-topped, lace-up, sturdy walking shoes. Her dress was a loose-fitting gray wool wrapper. Yesterday these clothes had seemed sensible. Now they just seemed drab. It was hopeless. She needed a brush and comb. More than that, she needed a bath and change of clothes.

For that matter, why was she even thinking about trying to charm Cord Bennett into anything? A lifetime of ignoring hate spewing from people like her own father had undoubtedly left Cord as impervious to charm as to everything else. The merest mention of the Bennett name could start her father on a tirade.

"If the Bennetts weren't rich, that mongrel would be locked up by now, or hung."

Mongrel was one of the nicer things her father called Cord, the first child of Jamie Bennett's shocking second marriage to an Indian woman. Even now, more than twenty years after the Sand Creek Massacre, hate and fear ran deep. Cord was the subject of that prejudice in all its forms and was as coldly indifferent to that as to everything else. He was seen in town occasionally with the family, but always slightly apart, stony-faced and eerily quiet. He raised horses on this corner of the Bennett Ranch, living and working alone, said to be just getting by as, of course, one would expect of a lazy half-breed.

Anne tried not to credit most of the stories about Cord, but there was no denying that when he was fifteen years old, he had almost killed a grown man. He had been in jail for weeks, and the Bennetts had indeed succeeded in having him released without a trial. Anne's father wasn't the only one who expressed righteous satisfaction when years later Cord turned on Frank Bennett, coming equally close to killing his half-brother.

Frank ran the Bennett Ranch, but he was often in town. Anne had heard him describe the incident one day in the general store. Frank had still been angry, and he swore there was no reason for the attack.

"He probably likes me as much as he likes anyone. He just can't help himself - I got in his way, and he's mean as a snake."

Cord's other half-brother, Ephraim, was one of Mason's two lawyers and lived in town, but he had been at the ranch the day of the fight. He was the one who had clubbed Cord off Frank. Ephraim didn't mince words either.

"Sometimes I wonder how Pa and Song could have produced him. You'd think even a cougar crossed with a she-wolf wouldn't

produce Cord. You'd need wolverine mixed in."

Even though his own family didn't disagree with the rest of the town about Cord in any way that mattered, Anne sometimes wondered if envy of the vast acres of the Bennett Ranch fueled the telling and retelling of stories about Cord.

Being alone with any man under these circumstances would be highly improper. Being alone with Cord Bennett at any time, in any place, should be unthinkable. Rousing from her musings, Anne poured herself another cup of coffee. Her empty stomach was long past the point of growling; it was a dull ache. Propriety be damned. No one would ever know she had been here, and maybe she *could* talk him into helping her. She was certainly going to try.

CORD WALKED TOWARD THE HOUSE with a pail partially filled with fresh milk in one hand and a battered tin with eggs in the other, mentally berating himself for his own foolishness. It was hard to believe a twenty-eight-year-old woman could be running away from home, but from the look of Anne Wells that was the way of it. Last night's rain meant no tracks for searchers to find, except here in the yard, but if she were discovered in his house, there would be hell to pay, and he would be the one paying it.

Also galling was the knowledge that if he had found any other woman asleep in his barn he would have waked her with a pail of cold water in the face, frightened her half to death, and run her off the place as fast as she could go. But not Anne. Anne was the only woman in the town of Mason, or for that matter in the whole State of Colorado, he would cross a street to help.

Moreover, sometime during the last hour, he'd given up trying to pretend he felt anything but pure pleasure at the thought of her in his house, waiting for him.

Well, his feelings didn't count for much. There was nothing for it now but to see that she got home or wherever she wanted to go in one piece as fast as possible. Leaving mud-covered moccasins on the porch, he stepped inside, his eyes immediately drawn to her, studying her.

The wonder of it was that every eligible bachelor for miles around hadn't courted Anne Wells. She was taller than fashionable maybe, but her slim five and a half feet was uncommonly graceful. Her femininity came not from an exaggerated full blown figure, but from subtle curves that blended one into the other, inviting the eye to follow. Soft brown hair made a silken frame for her heart-shaped face and huge gray eyes that gave away every thought. Of course, it was the directness of those great gray eyes that most people faulted her for and blamed for her being a spinster.

Anne had always looked to him as fresh as new spring grass, but now as she raised her head, giving him a trace of a smile, her condition appalled him. A long walk in last night's rain did not explain hair darkened with filth. Her face was so thin the magnificent eyes were light centers in huge black pits. The slightly pointed chin that had always seemed so delicate and feminine was now painfully too sharp, and the smell in the kitchen testified to her thoroughly unwashed state.

"I hope you don't mind that I borrowed your shirt."

It would need one hell of a scrubbing. "No." Cord searched for an explanation for the state she was in. "You been sick?"

She looked away evasively. He started to hang his coat and hat next to Anne's things, nearly missing her low-voiced answer.

"No, not sick, not exactly."

He did not push for a better answer but set the pail and eggs on the table, rolled up his sleeves, and started to wash up in the large pan near the stove. Drying his hands, he turned to catch Anne staring at the milk and eggs with a disturbing look of naked hunger.

How could her condition be starvation? Her family was well off. Only Edward Wells himself even pretended profits from his tailor's shop provided any part of the big house or other fancy things. Mrs. Wells had inherited money. Still, there was no mistaking that look.

When Anne finally tore her gaze from the pail and eggs, he said, "I'll cook. You talk."

The house seemed smaller to Anne with him in it. The flutters in her stomach were hunger; they had to be. Her mind darted from one problem to another, trying to think of a way out of telling him what he wanted to know. It was not a matter of washing her family's dirty linen in public. She felt no loyalty of that sort to them at this point. It was more a sense of personal embarrassment, and so she tried to avoid a real explanation.

"Well, I suppose you can tell I've left home. I need to get to Grenerton. I'm going to take the train from there and go to my Aunt Clara in Chicago. Maybe she'll let me live with her again. Would you maybe consider taking me to Grenerton?"

Ignoring her question, Cord asked one of his own. "Are there people looking for you?"

"Yes, probably, but they can't know where to look. I saw the Brower brothers' wagon behind the saloon - it was empty, they must have delivered something to town - and hid under the tarpaulin. I thought if I rode there until the wagon turned straight south I'd be just a few miles from Grenerton."

Cord stopped slicing bacon and gave her a hard look. "You have any idea how much trouble you'd be in if the Browers got their

hands on you in the middle of nowhere?"

She knew, but the risk seemed necessary at the time. "Yes, that's why when the rain started and I heard them talking about stopping to fix the tarp to keep them dry I rolled out of the wagon and hid in some bushes by the road until they were out of sight. They actually did stop and fiddle with the tarp." She repeated her request, "Would you help me get to Grenerton?"

Again the answer was another question, "How much money do you have?"

Drat him. Did he have to be difficult? "Enough," Anne stated firmly. "Will you help me? Please?"

He threw the bacon in a large frying pan and started mixing flour, milk, and eggs in a bowl. Anne could see nothing but his back, which was no less expressive than his face. Finally, he answered, "Maybe. Talk."

So the price of his help was going to be the whole ugly story. With a resigned shrug, she began to talk.

"My father has been upset for years that I'm not married, you know. He thinks having an old maid for a daughter is a reflection on him somehow."

Cord didn't turn around, but said, "He didn't want you married bad enough to favor Elroy Turrell, did he?"

"No. He didn't think a farmer's son was good enough, and I was only eighteen then. It was when I started seeing what he thought was too much of Elroy that he sent me to Chicago - to my Aunt Clara."

Watching him drain the bacon and start eggs frying, Anne was suddenly sure Cord agreed with her father about Elroy, although it would be Elroy's lack of gumption and not his prospects a Bennett would fault.

She distracted herself from the sharp hunger pains that the sight and scent of food were bringing on by studying Cord's back, admiring his easy, efficient movements. It should be funny. She was alone with Cord Bennett, and *he* was cooking *her* breakfast. It wasn't funny; it was humiliating. She hated her nerves, her filthiness, and having to tell him, of all people, about her troubles.

And he wasn't going to leave it alone. "You were engaged in Chicago," he prompted.

"Yes, for four years. His name was Richard Tyler, and he was a banker's son. My family was delighted about it. When I broke the engagement, Father was on the first train to Chicago to try to fix things. I never wanted to go East to start with, but Father wanted me to go, and I went. I didn't want to come back then, but he wanted me to come home, so I came - although I don't know why he

wanted me back, he was that angry. He went on and on for months about what a disgrace and failure I was - am. He hasn't lectured as much since, but every year he's been a little more desperate than the year before."

She tried to change the subject. "You were gone some of those same years yourself, weren't you? People say you looked like a wild Indian when you got back. Where were you off to?"

He didn't even turn around. "Some people say too much. You aren't saying enough."

Thwarted, Anne wrinkled her nose at his back and continued. "Well, that's the way things have been, and then early this summer, every time I turned around I was bumping into George Detrick. Do you know him?"

"I've seen him around."

"He's a widower, you know, and he's older than my father. His sons are older than I am, and they're - louts."

With an effort, Anne lowered her voice, which had been rising. "I know it's a sin to judge people by appearance, but I can't stand him. He's fat and greasy and has little beady eyes and he smells worse than I do right now all the time. His sons frighten me, and he's arrogant and patronizing and boring, and he keeps trying to pat my hands or arms when he talks to me, and it makes me feel dirty…."

Anne ran out of breath before she ran out of the litany of horrors.

Cord turned to face her while waiting for breakfast to finish cooking, arms folded across his chest. "Repulsive says it."

"Yes. Well. The thing is when he realized how I felt, he didn't give up. He just went to my father and said he wanted to marry me, and Father was overjoyed. He ordered me to marry Mr. Detrick."

"And you said no."

"It was the first time I ever defied Father in any way. He gets…, but I was sure when I explained…."

Her voice trailed off, but then she raised her head and met his eyes. "It doesn't make any difference to my father at all. Mr. Detrick is the only one who wants to marry me, and Father wants me married, and that's all that matters. All summer he bullied me and made the whole family miserable about it, but how could I agree? Marriage…."

In the instant before he turned back to the stove, she saw Cord's eyes turn icy, and the skin around them pull taut and flat. His anger on her behalf was even more mortifying, but it was easier to get the rest out without him looking at her.

"When Father realized I wasn't going to give in, he just came

home from the shop one evening and nailed boards over the windows in my bedroom and locked me in. I couldn't believe it. I was sure he was just trying to scare me, but then he told my mother to give me less than enough to eat. My mother - of course she didn't, and when he realized it he took the bedroom key, and after that there was less food every day than the day before. It's been weeks, and yesterday 'meals' were a slice of bread."

Anne had recited these facts steadily and without emotion, but now her voice wavered. "I was beginning to be really afraid. People get hungry enough to eat rats and snakes. I knew I would get hungry enough to marry George Detrick. Father was going to win."

With the most humiliating part over, Anne told the rest quickly. "I never really believed they'd leave me locked up like that for long, but even so, it was boring, and right from the first day I spent a lot of time working at the boards on the window over the porch. They were really loose by yesterday, and I was afraid if I waited any longer someone would notice. So I put all my strength into getting those boards off. I dropped to the ground by hanging from the edge of the porch roof and climbed into Browers' wagon without a second thought. No one in town would have been able to help, you know. They wouldn't believe it to start with.

"After I left the wagon I walked cross country until I saw your lamplight, but I didn't know who lived here. I didn't know it was Bennett land this far south. The dog barked once or twice and then ran out and sniffed me and acted friendly, so I curled up in the hay in the barn. I meant to leave as soon as the rain stopped, but I fell asleep."

"Of course if you'd known who did live here you'd have come right to the house."

His tone and the amusement that warmed his eyes almost restored Anne's spirits. She could not help but respond in kind to such an utterly impossible suggestion. "Of course, and asked if you'd like a house guest."

At this point he put two plates with hotcakes, eggs, and bacon on the table, and Anne stopped talking and started eating with an unmannered vengeance.

After watching for a few seconds, Cord said, "Slow down, or it will come back up even faster."

Glancing up, Anne decided he wasn't criticizing, but advising. She forced herself to stop shoveling and began to chew. They ate in silence, and when her plate was clean, she regretfully turned down the offer of more.

"No, thank you, I'd like more, but you're right, it wouldn't stay down. You have no idea how much I needed that. Truly, thank you."

Cord leaned back in his chair and pinned her with the eyes that caused so much comment. Not yellow, amber maybe. He repeated his previous question. “How much money do you have?”

A most persistent and exasperating man, she thought, but admitted, “Twenty dollars. It was in my room. It’s mine.”

Now Anne searched his face in vain for clues to what he was thinking as he said, “I’ve got some cash around here. I can spare you a hundred and fifty. If you’ll take it, I’ll hitch up the buggy and take you to Grenerton. I don’t suppose you can ride?”

“No, I can’t, but I can’t take your money either. Please just help me with getting there.”

“A loan from me wouldn’t be proper, huh?”

“It not only wouldn’t be proper. It wouldn’t be right. If I live with my aunt, I’ll be living on her charity. If she’s on Father’s side and won’t let me stay there, and I go to friends and find employment somewhere, I’ll still never be able to repay you a hundred and fifty dollars. You know that.”

He stood and picked up the dirty dishes and put them in the dishpan and began covering them with hot water from the reservoir in the stove. She started to rise, thinking to help, but he ordered, “Sit,” and she sat.

Anne studied him again as he washed the few dishes. He was probably about her brother’s height, an inch or so over six foot, but leaner and leggier. Rob might be as broad in the shoulders, but while her brother was certainly not fleshy, he did not taper so smoothly to such a narrow waist and hips.

Standing perfectly still Cord radiated a raw power. Small wonder people feared him. He was always polite enough to shopkeepers and others in town, but he never offered an unnecessary word, and his face was an impassive mask. Anne’s own pulse was disconcertingly strong and quick in her throat.

Finished cleaning up, Cord refilled both coffee cups and sat back down across from her. His words, deliberate and considered, changed the direction of her thoughts abruptly.

“Assuming your folks don’t catch you and drag you home, if you go into Grenerton with only twenty dollars, you’ll be lucky to get to Chicago. If your aunt won’t help, you’ll end up whoring. You’re pretty enough, but you’re not young enough. You’ll service men older, uglier, and meaner than George Detrick, and lots of them.”

Never in her life had anyone spoken to her like that! “I will not! It’s certainly nice to hear your real opinion of me!”

“You think you could get hungry enough to marry somebody you hate, but not hungry enough to sell yourself to strangers? Why

do you think women become whores - because they like it?"

That was exactly what she thought, but she wasn't about to say so now. She glared at him.

"I'll take you to Grenerton if you'll take the money. If you want to be stupid, walk there with your damn twenty dollars. It's up to you."

She stared at him in amazement. His condition was blackmail in reverse, and it was ridiculous. Before she could even decide how to try to argue further, the dog started barking. There had been no sounds of horses approaching, but now male voices sounded outside.

Cord got to his feet. "Guess they have some idea where you are after all. Play your cards right, and you won't have to worry about Detrick."

He seemed unconcerned, but Anne's stomach contracted with fear that approached panic. "How much trouble will this be for you?" she whispered.

"You're not crying. Just lots of cussing and threats. Get your things and come along."

* * *

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Chapter 2

OBEDIENTLY, ANNE ROSE AND FOLLOWED him toward the door. As she picked up her shoes, she saw that for all his casualness, Cord was reaching for the rifle that hung on the wall near the door. The door crashed open before he had the weapon free.

"Leave it."

Anne dimly recognized the swarthy, big-bellied man pointing a pistol at Cord, but she could not put a name to the face. He stepped out of the doorway, gesturing with the gun. Cord walked out without a word.

The intruder tipped his hat at Anne. "You better be thinking of a good story for your daddy, honey. He got more exercised with every mile we rode even before Browers started us looking here. We snuck up on this place like we were the Injuns. I wouldn't want to be in your shoes right now." He raked his eyes over her with deliberate insult, then laughed. "Or out of them."

He seized her by the upper arm, roughly pushing her toward the open door. Anne dropped her shoes to fight him, but then heard her father's voice rising over the confusion of sounds in the yard.

"You half-breed bastard, what have you done to my daughter? She's here. Those are her footprints!"

Anne stopped resisting and let her captor push her outside. Later she would realize that there were only ten men and horses in the yard, but right then it seemed like a hundred, all milling and churning around. Besides her father, she immediately picked out George Detrick. The rest of the men must have volunteered when her father looked for a search party to help find her. Three of them had guns drawn, all aimed at Cord.

She barely recognized the man standing face to face with Cord. The very erect military bearing was her father's, as was the dark hair only touched with gray. But Edward's face was mottled red with rage, and under his precisely trimmed mustache, his mouth was a thin, twisted line.

More frightened than ever by the sight, Anne ran to her father, reaching for his arm, crying, "No, don't."

Edward rounded on her, grabbing her by the upper arms and shaking her like a rag doll.

"Did you think you'd get away with it? Did you think nobody saw you get in Browers' wagon? I thought we had to save you from them, but this is worse! You fool, you couldn't obey me and marry a respectable man, you had to run off and get yourself ruined by Bennett trash!"

He was shouting, spitting a fine spray of saliva. “Anyone can tell what’s been going on here. Either he forced you or you were willing. Say he forced you!”

Defying her father further in front of all these other men would be the worst thing she could do - except for telling the lie he demanded. When he stopped shaking her, she said very carefully, loudly, and distinctly, so that everyone would hear, not just her father, “He never touched me.”

She expected disbelief and more anger, but never the full-strength backhanded blow that smashed into the side of her face. Stunned, she staggered back against a porch post, the only thing that kept her from falling. Her mouth filled with the metallic taste of blood. She had never been hit before.

All Anne could see was her father and his anger, but she heard Cord’s words clearly enough.

“Leave her alone, damn you. She didn’t….

The sound that stopped his words wasn’t the crack of flesh on flesh, but a dull thud. A gun barrel Anne thought.

Her father again seized her by the upper arms. “Say he forced you!”

This time Anne was ready for his reaction as she again carefully enunciated, “He never tou…,” but that was as far as she got before the second blow exploded on the other side of her face. She didn’t fall because someone had come up behind her and was holding her upright.

“I didn’t come along to watch anybody beat a woman.”

Anne managed to bring things back into focus, and saw Dick Brown, a farmer who lived near Turrells, mount his horse and ride away. Then Cord snaked into motion, using the diversion to dive under the guns, taking the man on his left down with him, kicking the feet out from under another. There were simply too many of them, and a fight wasn’t what they had in mind. A shot rang out, and when Cord got slowly to his feet, blood soaked his shirt on one side just above his belt.

Violence charged the air as palpably as the electricity of the storm had the night before. Anne was afraid to look at Cord, couldn’t bear that she had brought this horror down on him. George Detrick broke the ominous silence, making things worse.

“Ed, I’m sorry as hell, and I sure sympathize with what you must be feeling, but I can’t marry her now.”

Edward’s color had almost returned to normal. Now it rose again. “It’s bad enough she’s so stupid she was in his house in this condition, but if she says he didn’t hurt her yet, he didn’t. God knows she’s got her faults, but lying isn’t one of them. You heard

what she said."

"I heard, and if you need to believe her, I understand. But I don't."

As Detrick reached a pudgy hand toward her, Anne cringed away, but he didn't touch her, just plucked at her hair, then held up a stalk of hay, twirling it between his fingers so the seed tassle at the end danced.

"I slept in the barn," Anne said furiously. "Cord didn't even know I was here until just before you found me."

She couldn't even hear her own last words over the coarse laughter of the man holding her. Samuels, she thought. Lem Samuels. His dirty looking friends, who had their guns on Cord, were the Meeks brothers and Red O'Brien. All four worked for the Double M Ranch east of town, an outfit known to hire hands willing to intimidate small land owners over grazing and water rights.

Now Charlie Meeks spoke up. "I think you're trying to marry the wrong couple, Wells. Bennett here will make things right. Won't you?"

"Absolutely not," said Edward. "There are no circumstances under which I'd allow…."

Meeks pulled Edward away from the others. At first as Meeks talked, Anne could see her father shaking his head steadily, but then she saw a slow nod, then several more.

When the men returned there was an ugly smile on Meeks' face. "I rode out here for a wedding, and I'm going to see a wedding. Now, tough man, you're going to make it right, aren't you?"

"There's nothing to make right," Cord said flatly.

"Oh, yes, there is, and you're going to do it," Meeks said.

"Like hell."

Moments later Cord sagged almost unconscious. He had not said another word, but the defiance in his eyes made it clear Meeks wasn't going to get what he wanted.

With the first blow, Anne tried to cry out, but Samuels shifted his hold on her to just his left hand across her mouth, pulling her head viciously back against his shoulder, and forcing her spine into a painful arc. She clawed at his hand and arm but only tore her fingernails on his heavy jacket and leather glove. Kicks from Anne's stocking-clad feet only gave Samuels cause to mock her.

"You might as well quit tiring yourself out. You ain't hurting nothing but your feet."

He then pulled his right glove off with his teeth. Muttering vile obscenities, he began to paw, pinch, and twist at every bit of her he could reach.

Trying to see what Charlie Meeks was doing to Cord, squirming

to avoid the disgusting pawing of her own person, Anne still saw stealthy movement across the yard. The brown, fox-faced dog that had escorted her to the barn last night was stalking hesitantly toward Cord and the men who held him.

The movement also caught Charlie Meeks' eye, and with a wider grin, he drew his pistol, boasting, "Watch this, boys."

Cord's violent lunge caught them all by surprise, and spoiled Meeks' aim. The sound of the shot and the dog's scream came together, but the dog streaked under the porch ahead of Charlie's second shot.

Jimmy Meeks gave his brother a knowing look and drawled, "The tough man didn't like that one bit, Charlie. Maybe digging that mutt out would get us some cooperation here."

Charlie shook his head thoughtfully, then turned to Thomas White, a saloon keeper from town, and said, "See those horses in the corral? Catch one up and bring it over here."

Anne had been trying to convince herself that neither her father nor Reverend Pratt knew what Samuels was doing to her. Now, as everyone waited while White got a halter from the barn and caught one of the all too friendly horses, she saw her father, Reverend Pratt, George Detrick, and Michael Benton, the Mason butcher, give furtive looks her way.

There was no doubt they all knew what Samuels was doing, saw her desperate struggles against his painful, invasive groping, and just looked away again. None of the townsmen were going to stand against the casual violence of the Double M men, and her father had come to some agreement with Charlie Meeks.

White led the bay gelding he had caught to Meeks. Charlie pointed his pistol at the animal's left front knee and turned to look Cord in the eye.

"What do you say, tough man? I hear you raise good horses. How about I shoot one knee on each one of that bunch over there?"

Even Samuels was concentrating on Charlie so intently his hand had stopped, and what Anne saw burning in Cord's eyes made her swallow hard, even as he gave in. "All right. You win."

White dropped the rope. The bay gelding wandered to the edge of the yard, and began eating grass there. Anne wanted to shout at the animal. *Run, run so far they can never catch you again,* but she knew that was foolish. There were still half a dozen potential victims confined in the corral.

Charlie called, "Hey, bring the bride over, Lem," and Samuels shoved Anne next to Cord, who was standing unaided now although with Jimmy Meeks' gun in his back. Things began to seem more and more unreal. Reverend Pratt came forward, pulled his prayer book

from a pocket with a shaking hand, and at Charlie's direction, began to read the words of the wedding ceremony in a setting that made a travesty out of the ages old vows.

Anne did not look at Cord, but heard him slurring the words, unable to speak clearly if he had wanted to with the damage Meeks' fists had done to his face. When her turn came, she found she too could barely form words with her swollen mouth and split lips. She repeated everything the preacher told her to until he said "to love, cherish, and to obey."

Then she lifted her head, found a small spark of defiance left, looked Pratt right in the eyes and said, "to love and to cherish." No one else seemed to notice, and Pratt quickly dropped his gaze.

Finally, the preacher intoned, "I now pronounce you husband and wife," snapped his book shut, and hurried out of the way.

Lem Samuels dragged Anne backward behind the men all looking toward Meeks and Cord. Charlie shouted, "And now for a little shivaree," and then Anne's own nightmare intensified to where she was only barely aware of Meeks' steady, rhythmic beating of Cord. The rain of blows continued long after he slumped insensate in the cowboys' grip.

Samuels again shifted his hold to across her bruised and bleeding mouth, and this time she felt his right hand running up under Cord's shirt to the top of the back of her dress.

"Now hold still, bitch, and you won't get cut."

She could not see, could only feel the knife cutting through her dress and all her under things, and into her back. At first she felt only the icy blade itself, then her blood welled, warm and wet, and with it came fiery pain.

The bulk of her dress and petticoats and the tough cloth of her corset had spared her the worst of his previous pawing. Now when his hand returned, under the shirt and inside her gaping dress, there was nothing to protect her flesh from his deliberately cruel hand. The steady stream of threats and filthy talk was interrupted only when his mouth came down on her face, neck, or shoulders. The first time he bit her she screamed against his gloved hand. He pinched and twisted her breasts and nipples mercilessly, then moved down to her stomach and thighs.

As Anne struggled against him with all her strength, the breakfast that had seemed so good a lifetime ago started to come up, sour in the back of her throat. She began to retch helplessly, choking under Samuels' relentless hold. He cursed in disgust, shoved her away, and Anne fell to her knees on the muddy ground, vomiting up not just her breakfast but it seemed the very lining of her stomach.

At the back of her mind, through her own horror and wretchedness, she was aware that Meeks and O'Brien had finally let go of Cord. Not just the Meeks brothers and O'Brien, but most of the mob were now kicking his lifeless body, missing nothing from the back of his head to his legs. There was no longer any doubt that they meant murder and that Cord had been mercifully beyond feeling for some time now.

After the eternity of pain and terror, she heard Charlie Meeks' voice, laughing as if it had all been a fine joke, "Just like I said, Wells, a bride and a widow in the same day. Enjoy your honeymoon, tough man."

Then men were mounting their horses, riding away, but Anne continued to huddle on her knees in the mud, her empty stomach racked with spasms. Footsteps approached, and she heard Reverend Pratt, shrill-voiced with his own fear.

"Edward, they've killed him. He's dead!"

Her father was filled with vindictive fury. "He should have been hung. His family won't buy him out of this."

"But you said you believed her."

"It doesn't matter! You heard Detrick. No decent man will have her."

If Pratt replied, Anne didn't hear it. Her father forced her head up by the chin until she was looking through swelling, slitted eyes into his enraged face.

"You brought this on yourself, daughter. Honoring thy father as commanded would have spared us all this disgrace." Edward sounded like an old testament prophet full of righteous wrath.

"You are filthy in every way and I won't have you on a horse with me. You get yourself cleaned up and consider how you're going to convince me to allow you back under my roof."

Dropping her head, Edward walked away, mounted his horse, and he and Pratt rode off after the others.

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Chapter 3

WHEN HER TORMENTED STOMACH FINALLY quieted, Anne raised her head and looked numbly around. She saw the mountains looming to the west, blue-black and white capped. The fall sky was so bright a blue it hardly seemed real, and the fat, gold cottonwood leaves rustled softly in the background as they swirled to the ground. Nature herself seemed to be trying to deny the death scene only a few feet away. Cord's face was no longer distinguishable, just a bloody mask. His clothes were soaked with dark red patches, sticking to his flesh. The wind ruffled his hair, emphasizing the stillness of his body.

Her vision blurred from swelling eyes and stinging tears as she crawled to Cord's body. She stared at his bloodied face, wishing she could reverse time, have run from this place when she woke up this morning. He was dead because she had asked him for help. No matter how unintentionally, she had caused his death by bringing her trouble to his doorstep.

A tiny movement caught her attention. She gasped in disbelief as she saw it again, a drop of blood running from his nose and dripping down into a wet spot on the ground. Did dead men bleed? Her hand quivered as she forced it out and touched his arm. His body was warm and his flesh was not stiff, but elastic, alive.

Anne fell into a sitting position beside Cord's body with a thump. What on earth was she going to do now? Surely he was dying anyway, but she couldn't just leave him on the muddy ground, and how, dear God, how, could she move him?

For long moments Anne fought against giving way to hysteria. Guilt, grief, fear - she was immobilized by her own emotions. The day was only chilly, but the ground was cold and wet. Laying here, the exposure would finish killing him. Moving him in any imaginable way would further damage his internal organs. Frank Bennett lived within a few miles of here, but she had no idea in which direction and no strength to go for help. She rested her forehead on her hands, closed her aching eyes and began to pray.

"Dear God, please help me," she whispered. "Tell me what to do, give me the strength to do anything at all."

Slowly Anne pushed to her feet. She stood very straight, taking deep breaths of the clean fall wind, waiting for the weakness to pass, then bent, hooked her hands under Cord's upper arms, and began to pull. She dragged his body across the yard toward the house foot by foot. It was not as impossible as she had feared, almost but not quite beyond her. Her back felt as if it were breaking

from the effort, the awkward position, and Samuels' earlier attentions long before she got to the porch.

The two low porch steps were more formidable obstacles than any mountains. Just getting Cord into the house was a triumph, but now what? She could never get him into a bed without help. The memory of the vicious kicks to his back as he lay in the yard came to her, and she knew she couldn't leave him on the hard floor either. Two doorways off the main room led to bedrooms, one unused and the other obviously Cord's.

Anne pulled the mattress from Cord's bed to the floor, thinking to drag it to the main room, close to the stove, but the cumbersome thing wedged itself between the bed and the wall. She decided not to waste time or strength trying to move it.

Dragging Cord into the bedroom and onto the mattress was not as hard, but Anne collapsed in relief beside him when it was done. A faint gurgling sound made her sit up, pull herself together, and listen intently. Cord's head was straight now, not bent toward his shoulder as it was in the yard and when she dragged him. In seconds she realized what she had done, he was drowning in his own blood. She turned his head gently, then fought another wave of nausea as a thin, steady stream of blood began to run from his nose.

"Oh, God, I'm sorry," she whispered. "I am so sorry…."

How long would it take a man to bleed to death from such a steady drip? Furious with her own weakness, Anne gritted her teeth. He was probably going to die no matter what, but she was not going to be the cause by sitting here weeping, giving up.

Anne searched the house for anything she could use. She found no medicines but tore clean sheets for bandages. She wasted no time trying to get Cord's clothes off in the usual way. She just picked up the sharpest knife in the kitchen and began cutting. She had never seen a naked man before, and as she cut, she chided herself for her own ridiculous feelings of embarrassment. He was unconscious and dying, and she was dithering.

The sight of the body she was exposing cured that silliness instantly. What she was seeing now could bear little resemblance to a healthy, unclothed male.

"I am not going to faint. I am not going to cry. I am not, I am not." She chanted the words over and over under her breath, as if enough repetitions would make them true.

Every time her stomach threatened to start heaving again over the sight of the injuries, she walked out of the bedroom, breathed deep and counted until calm again. Three times she got past a hundred.

Cord's injuries were so severe there were great fevered

swellings. The bruises weren't black and blue but an angry reddish purple and in many places blood looked to be pooled under the surface as if it would pour out if the skin were slit. Raw wounds covered his back, and there was blood in his hair. If she had not seen him shot, she would not have even noticed the bullet wound. The bullet had gone through his side just below the ribs and was at least not in him.

Anne fetched a pail of icy creek water and kept cold compresses on the worst of the swellings as she worked on the wounds. She washed every inch of him, using lots of soap, and emptying the basin often.

Cleaning the dried blood from Cord's face she bit her already scabbed lower lip, for there was no question the gash across one cheekbone needed to be stitched. Before her courage failed, she scrubbed out the cut, searched the house until she found a needle and thread, and put in a row of uneven stitches with shaking hands.

Not knowing what else to do for him, she rolled his inert body one way and then the other a last time to remove the damp, stained sheet and get a clean, dry one under him, made sure his head was tilted so he was could breathe, and folded a towel over the pillow to absorb the blood. She tucked blankets over him gently and smoothed the black hair.

"If I could start this day over, yesterday over…." How useless that was. He couldn't hear her, and she couldn't turn back time.

In the kitchen, Anne tended to the stove, then forced herself to drink a cup of milk. Her stomach didn't rebel. In fact the nausea and light headedness seemed to be passing.

Lengthening shadows gave notice the dreadful day would soon end. The animals outside were oblivious to human tragedy and had their own needs. Maybe Cord raised horses on this corner of the Bennett Ranch, but it looked more like a farm. Two cows grazed in a nearby pasture. There were pigs in pens leading off the far side of the barn, and chickens pecked around another pen. It would be easier to deal with the livestock in daylight.

Hours later, Anne trudged back into the house with the pail once again partially filled with fresh milk. This time it was milk she herself had gotten out of cows made uncooperative by her clumsiness.

The lamplight showed Cord exactly as she had left him, still breathing slowly and shallowly. After covering him with another blanket against the cooler night air, Anne smoothed his hair again and stroked his swollen cheek lightly just under the line of crooked stitches, wishing desperately she knew more to do for him.

Weary beyond bearing herself, Anne couldn't leave Cord alone

through the night. She borrowed another one of his shirts for a nightgown, bundled herself tightly in a quilt so she could not accidentally bump him, and lay down beside him. Soft light from the lamp she left burning could not stop the darkness in her mind. Exhaustion battled with nonstop reenactments of the terrors of the day. Enraged faces appeared and disappeared through a red haze, and jeering voices echoed.

After a while she reached one arm out from the quilt, burrowed it under the blankets and found Cord's hand. Whether she was giving or taking comfort she couldn't have said. Soon after she finally fell asleep.

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Chapter 4

BRIGHT SUNSHINE STREAMING THROUGH THE bedroom windows brought Anne awake the next morning, stiff, sore, and afraid of what the day might bring. Her first movement brought a loud moan to her lips. After a second attempt, she managed to sit up.

At first it seemed there had been no change in Cord's condition at all. He lay peacefully in the same position, shallow breaths coming regularly. Checking him more carefully, she realized the blood on his upper lip was dried, and there was no fresh blood soaking the towel under his head. Before her spirits could lift over this improvement, she discovered he was lying in a pool of reddish fluid, certain evidence of how terrible the internal injuries must be.

As she washed and scrubbed and replaced the linens and placed cloths under his hips, pessimism rose unbidden and unwanted. All the scrubbing and worrying and praying in the world was not going to make any difference. He was going to die.

Finished with everything she knew to do for Cord, Anne went to the unused front bedroom to dress. She glanced in the mirror over the bureau and immediately felt worse. No force of will was able to straighten her spine. She was hunched over like an old woman. Black, blue, and purple bruises covered her face so completely she did not recognize herself. Her lips were not just swollen but scabbed where they had split, and Cord's shirt hung down on her bony shoulders, exposing skin broken with ugly bite marks and more bruises. If he ever wakes up, the sight of me will scare him to death she thought bitterly.

Strangely enough, as the day passed, Anne found peace descending on her. Caring for the livestock was easier. The dog ventured out from under the porch and lined up with the cats for a share of fresh milk. Anne chose to consider the fact that the dog had no wounds as a small victory.

It took quite a bit of sweet talking and the lure of grain in a bucket, but in the end Anne talked the horse Meeks had threatened to shoot into letting her get a hold of the rope still dragging from his halter. She put him back in the corral with his fellows, made sure there was enough water in the trough, and filled the hay rack in the corral.

The night before she had just turned away from the sick colt in the barn, unable to deal with more misery. The young horse looked close to death. This morning she managed to force half a dozen lumps of sugar down the unwilling rack of bones. Hugging, petting, and whispering to the little animal, she promised him life would be

good again if he just got better. It crossed her mind to question that herself, but she pushed the thought aside.

She found a metal tub large enough for a bath at the side of the house, and a few well worn woman's garments folded away in a chest in the front bedroom. The clothes probably belonged to Cord's sister, Marie, who had married and left Mason years ago. Anne laid out clean undergarments, a dark brown skirt, and a pale yellow waist. Pumping water until her arms ached and keeping herself awake while the water heated were wonderfully worthwhile. The bath and borrowed clothes left her feeling truly clean for the first time since her father had locked her up.

That night Anne again wrapped herself in the quilt and settled for the night beside Cord, holding his hand. She idly speculated whether the changes inside herself were forever, for she felt different, stronger, than two days ago. Just as she began to feel drowsy, the hand in hers tightened. Her eyes flew open only to see Cord's head straightened and eyes half open.

Haste to get free turned the quilt into a clinging trap. Anne knelt over him at last, heart pounding, but could find no awareness in his eyes. When she lifted the back of his head and tipped a cup of water against his mouth, he managed three swallows, then relapsed into unconsciousness. She cursed her own ignorance - whether this brief interlude was a good sign or not she had no idea.

Uncertain she might be, but she fell asleep with a slight smile on her mangled lips, and woke at dawn to find the light brown eyes so close to her own open and looking at her with life back in them. This time he swallowed almost a full cup of water before leaving her again.

On this third morning Anne found she no longer felt frightened and burdened by the responsibility of caring for the animals. She enjoyed resting her forehead against the warm, furry side of a cow and watching the streams of milk begin to froth in the pail. She liked hearing the excited squeals of the pigs settle to contented grunts after she mixed a slop with the milk and finely ground grain she found near their pens.

Her heart lifted when the sick colt nuzzled her hand and took the lump of sugar she offered without being forced, chewing and swallowing slowly and without much enthusiasm, but nevertheless willingly. The corralled horses dug into their hay in an appreciative way, and even the chickens came running for their breakfast so that the effort seemed worthwhile.

Hardening her heart, she butchered the first chicken that pecked at her. After all these years Anne was finally grateful to her mother's friend, Maudie, who had nagged her into learning this

nasty skill over her protests and tears many years ago when marrying Elroy Turrell seemed likely.

"Now, Anne, dear," Maudie had said, "a farmer's wife can't be soft-hearted about these things. It's a fact of life, and you'd better accept it."

The next time Cord came to, Anne was going to have chicken broth ready for him, not just water. She was also going to have bread, and there was no reason the pigs had to have all that milk with the cream. From now on she would let it separate first and save the cream for butter.

She started to burn her own clothes, but in the end she washed, repaired, and saved everything but the destroyed corset. No use blaming the clothes for what had happened while she was wearing them.

Anne had lived her whole life following the dictates of others. Now all the decisions were hers. What to do, when to do it, how to do it, so much depended on her, but instead of feeling weighed down, minute by minute, hour by hour, this new life wove a spell around her, leaving her feeling lighter and freer than she had ever dreamed possible.

Twice more that morning she found Cord awake. He spoke not a word, but his eyes followed her, and each time she managed to get more water and some broth down him. That afternoon he finally spoke. "How long?"

"Today is Wednesday, the third day."

"You like cleaning up after me, or can I have a pan?"

She couldn't help trying to grin at him. "I'll find a pan."

Her spirits soared at the sight of the few small swirls of red in the fluid. He really was going to be all right. It even seemed that he was now sleeping, not unconscious, but perhaps she just wanted to believe that. Late that evening he insisted she strap his ribs tightly in spite of the bruises. She kept her head turned so he wouldn't see her cry.

That night she carried the rocking chair into the bedroom and curled up there to keep her vigil. Again she woke to find his eyes on her.

This time she didn't hurry to push water or broth at him but knelt on the edge of the mattress. "You know I never meant to cause all this, to get you killed or to cause you so much pain."

He didn't answer but took a steely hold on her wrist. "Take off the shirt." Once again she had used his shirt for a nightgown.

The strength of his grip surprised her. "Are you crazy? I will not."

"Take off the damn shirt."

It was insane. She wouldn't even have to hit him, just push firmly anywhere on his torso and he would pass out and that would be the end of that. She looked hard into the amber eyes, which now had a stubborn glint, considering. For the moment they were certainly past all modesty, and she thought she knew what he wanted.

She let go of the edges of the quilt, and it fell around her. Then she unbuttoned his shirt with her free hand and pushed it off her shoulders, not looking at him, but feeling his gaze as he examined every exposed inch.

"Your back."

She turned, letting him have a good look at her back, and when he let go of her wrist, pulled the shirt back in place and rebuttoned it before turning to look at him again. He was staring at the ceiling. "Samuels?"

"Yes, except my face."

"Did they stop him?"

"He stopped when I brought up the breakfast you fed me. Truthfully I don't think anybody would have lifted a hand or said a word to stop anything, but I guess it was too much for him right under my father and Reverend Pratt's noses. He certainly told me in sordid detail what he wanted to do."

He still stared at the ceiling. "Any chance of something to eat more than that soup stuff?"

She stood and carefully examined the ravaged face. "No, soup stuff is all you get until you stop passing blood." There was no answer, and she headed for the other bedroom to dress, humming to herself.

Two hours later her new-found serenity was shattered into a thousand pieces.

The first warning was a series of high pitched barks from the fox-faced dog, and then there were sounds of horses entering the yard. One frantic glance showed Samuels, O'Brien, and both of the Meeks brothers, dismounting and tying their horses in front of the main barn.

Anne wrenched the rifle down from the wall, picked up a box of shells and the gunbelt and pistol from the shelf underneath and ran to the bedroom, shaking Cord awake by the arm with no regard for his feelings.

"Load one for me. Load one, and show me how to shoot it. They're back. Oh, God, they're back!" She was almost incoherent with fear, and he didn't even ask who was back.

"They are loaded. Watch." He took the rifle from her and worked the lever, then demonstrated squeezing the trigger without

actually touching it. “Let them get close and aim at the middle of the body. Keep your back to a wall.”

Anne ran for the front door with the rifle. A cautious peek outside showed Samuels emerging from the carriage shed, O’Brien waiting for him in the middle of the yard, and the Meeks brothers coming together from the main barn. They were probably looking for things to steal she thought venomously. Laughing and joking, they were now walking toward the house.

Anne slipped out the front door, put her back firmly to the outside wall and raised the rifle. Spotting her, the men halted halfway across the yard. On each side of Charlie Meeks, his brother, Samuels and O’Brien began to move sideways, putting distance between themselves. Charlie gave her the obscene grin she knew only too well.

“Hey, now, what are you still doing here? How about we take you home? You can ride with me.”

Anne didn’t waste breath answering him.

“So, your daddy don’t want you no more? We’ll take you. It’ll be a treat for you, honey. Four white men ought to seem like a treat after that Injun.”

Anne still said nothing, didn’t move.

“Come on now. That thing probably ain’t even loaded, and shooting a man isn’t something a lady can do. Why don’t you just put that down and let’s do this friendly like.”

Anne had never been as sure of anything as that she could shoot Charlie Meeks, would in fact love to see that disgusting, mocking grin disappear in a spray of blood. She just hoped for the luck to send one of the four to hell before the others got to her. She could not possibly get more than one when she had never even fired a gun before, but that wouldn’t stop her trying.

Slight thumping noises were coming from the house, but she didn’t turn to look. If more men were coming up behind her, her cause was lost anyway, no use taking her eyes off Charlie and his friends.

All four men began walking toward her again, Charlie still leering at her. “Aw, honey, you can’t shoot me.”

Anne heard another louder thump, and then a deep rasping, “I can,” as Cord lurched into the doorway, naked except for the white strapping on his ribs, leaning against the frame for support, and bringing the pistol to bear.

His first shot took Charlie Meeks in the shoulder, the second brought a yelp of pain from Lem Samuels. He doubled over, but Anne wasn’t sure where he had been hit. Neither man went off his feet, and all four were now running for their horses. Cord began to

slump down the door frame, and she hurried to ease his fall.

Just before he became dead weight, she heard him mutter, “Keep shooting.” So she did. The recoil frightened her but didn’t stop her. She emptied the rifle, then the pistol at the retreating figures, hoping they could not tell it was only her wild firing. The horses kept running.

When she dropped the empty pistol, Cord was on the floor, unconscious, shivering and covered with gooseflesh from the cold fall air, bleeding from one nostril again. She dragged him out of the doorway and ran to the bedroom, returning with a pillow and blankets and wrapping him where he lay. Sinking down beside him, unable to face dragging him back into the bedroom, she sat with her knees drawn up to her chest and her arms wrapped around them and began to rock back and forth, her mind refusing to function.

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Chapter 5

SHERIFF NOAH REYNOLDS DROVE A borrowed buggy through the crisp, clear air of a day so beautiful he would usually have been lost in admiration. Today, though, he hunched in thought, paying only the automatic attention to his surroundings that years of law enforcement in rough country had ingrained.

Noah was bound for the Bennett Ranch, and he was still not sure why. Edward Wells had come to him yesterday morning, demanding that his daughter Anne be "rescued" from Cord Bennett's, but almost nothing about his story made sense. Noah had to testify in court in the afternoon and refused Wells' demands for immediate action, but promised to look into the matter first thing today. He had, however, been forced to waste hours this morning calming an irate citizen who was losing a chicken a week and sure that her neighbors were helping themselves to a weekly roast chicken dinner.

Wells claimed his daughter had "stumbled" onto the Bennett Ranch, been beaten and raped by Cord, and that Wells and a rescue party had beaten Cord in retaliation and "accidentally" killed him. If they hanged the half-breed under those circumstances, trying to prosecute would be a waste of time. It made no sense that that was what Edward was lying about, and there was no doubt in Noah's mind that Edward was lying.

Wells refused to listen to Noah's patient explanation that rescuing crime victims was not part of a sheriff's job, became evasive and abusive when pressed about how Anne had gotten to the Bennett Ranch in the first place, and refused to answer at all when asked why he hadn't brought his daughter home immediately.

Everything about the story smelled bad, and Noah felt uneasy. Anne Wells had not been seen around town for more than a month now, and her family answered inquiries with a story of slow recovery from a fever. Noah now remembered a few gossips happily nodding their heads and implying that actually she was being held prisoner by her family in the continuing effort to get her to marry George Detrick, but Noah disregarded such stories as nonsense. Such Medieval happenings could not be occurring in his town in this year of 1885.

Noah was further troubled because of the Bennett family's involvement. The Bennetts had been long-time residents of Colorado when Noah arrived, but the sheriff had learned their history in bits and pieces over the years.

James Bennett had come west with his three young children,

Ephraim, Frank, and Hannah, in the ‘40s. At first he made a living any way he could - hunting, trapping, and trading. By the time Colorado became a territory in 1861, he had the boundaries of what would become the Bennett Ranch staked out, and he set about acquiring title to the land in earnest.

Noah knew some in Mason rationalized Jamie’s second marriage as clever politics. The land was still ruled by the Plains Tribes, and the Bennetts had indeed prospered without fear of Indian raids. Yet both Ephraim and Frank Bennett maintained that their father’s second marriage was a love match, and unlike most white men, Jamie married the woman he called Song before a Christian preacher.

Noah also knew it was Song Bennett’s death that had changed Jamie from a vital adventurer to an absent-minded man who left both running his ranch and raising Song’s son and daughter, Cord and Marie, to his older children.

Noah shook his head. Cord…. How on earth could Edward Wells and a few townsmen have beaten Cord Bennett? It would be Noah’s expectation that the half-breed could tear Edward and several like him to pieces. It was even harder to believe that Cord would commit such a crime.

Cord had spent ten days in Mason’s jail when he was only fifteen. At that time, Noah tried to help the boy come to terms with what his mixed blood would mean in a white man’s world, something Noah faulted the Bennetts for protecting him from too well for too long. Noah had ended up feeling uneasy about the quiet boy, a disquiet that turned to fear over the years. He often wondered if his meddling back then did more harm than good. Considering why Cord was jailed in the first place, it was even harder to believe he would hurt a woman, but there was no doubt that in the years since Cord returned to Mason from his never explained wanderings, he got leaner and meaner with each passing season.

The sheriff sighed, thinking that perhaps it was just as well the man was dead. He had often feared worse trouble than this.

Suddenly Noah sat up straight, carefully scanning the road and range ahead. Some movement and trace of dust alerted his always watchful sixth sense. A strong conviction came on him that riders coming this way were avoiding passing him on the road, something he would have investigated if he weren’t due back in court again this afternoon. The judge didn’t come through Mason often enough to wait half a day on an absent sheriff. Noah cursed the restrictions of the buggy instead of a saddle horse, but he knew Anne Wells had never been on a horse, and the purpose of his trip was to bring her

home. If he weren't so short of time, he might stop at the main Bennett Ranch and talk to Frank, but as things were he'd best head straight to Cord's.

As Noah drove into the ranch yard, he looked around in surprise. It had been many years since he had been on this part of the Bennett Ranch, and talk in town about how poorly Cord lived had made him forget how sturdy and attractive these old buildings really were. They all had fresh paint, the yard and corrals were in good repair, and the stock visible was in good shape. One man did not keep a place looking like this by lazing around.

A dog hiding behind the barn barked shrilly at him. Noah slowed, drew his gun, and began to approach the house with care as he noticed the front door standing open. Moving quietly across the porch, he glanced in the door and stopped in his tracks at the sight that greeted him. The man wrapped in blankets on the floor was only recognizable by the raven black hair. A woman who had to be Anne Wells huddled on the floor beside the man's body, arms cradling her knees, rocking back and forth. Close now, Noah could hear a soft keening rising and falling in a mindless cadence.

Holstering his gun, he managed to utter an incredulous, questioning, "Anne?"

His single word caused a flurry of motion. Anne scrambled after the rifle on the floor, reached it and turned in a crouch. Her bruised face was contorted in a terrible grimace, and she was aiming straight at his middle from a distance of only a few feet. Noah took two steps back, holding his hands out at his sides, waist high and palms up, and began using his most soothing tone.

"Now, Anne, you know I'm not going to hurt you. It's only me, Noah Reynolds, and I've come to take you home."

Noah had been sheriff of Mason a long time. He expected her to recognize him, hoped his soft tone would calm her, but didn't expect her reaction. She dropped the rifle and threw herself in his arms whimpering, "Help me. Please help."

He held her in a fatherly hug and patted her back, hoping a bit of comfort might restore her senses. When her sobbing let up, he tried to guide her through the door, saying, "Come on, now, I've got a buggy right outside and we'll have you home in no time," but she pulled loose and got down on her knees beside Cord.

"No. You don't understand. I'm never going home. I need help getting him back to the bedroom. If you'll help me, we could even get him into the bed. He's all broken up inside and he's made it worse. Please help me get the bed back together and then carry him for me. If you'll keep his body straight, I can support his head and shoulders."

Noah picked up both the rifle and the nearby pistol, checked and saw they were empty, and looked back at Anne. “We’ll stop at Frank’s and send him back here to see what can be done. If he’s still alive, he’ll hang for doing this to you anyway.”

In spite of the blackened eyes and swollen face, Noah could see fury sweep over her. “You’ll hang him over my dead body. He’s the only one who didn’t hurt me.”

Remembering his musings on the trip out here, Noah knew that his suspicions had all been right. Something was very wrong, and the only way he was going to find out was to get Anne calmed down and telling her story. “All right, show me what you need.”

Noah lifted the mattress back on the bed, and waited while Anne remade the bed, then followed her back to where Cord lay. She slid her arms under Cord’s shoulders, and looked up at Noah. “Please?”

With a sigh, Noah started to lift the long body.

“Try not to let him sag. Don’t bend him.” There was so much concern in her voice, Noah gentled his touch and tried to follow her instructions, and together they carried the unconscious man to the bedroom. Noah started when she pulled the blanket off Cord, embarrassed until he took in the injuries and all other thoughts fled.

“Good Lord, is he really alive like that?”

“He was, if he didn’t kill himself this morning.”

She made Noah hold Cord while she washed his reopened wounds then carefully straightened his senseless body, fussing over tilting his head just so over a towel and replacing clean cloths under his hips and upper thighs.

At this Noah’s embarrassment returned. “See here, Anne, this isn’t right. You can’t be doing this sort of thing.”

She didn’t even glance up. “This is the fourth day I’ve been doing this sort of thing. I stopped worrying about my sensibilities in the first five minutes.”

Noah watched her tuck the sheet and blankets around the battered body with tender care, and then followed her to the kitchen, where she turned and said, “I’m sorry for the hysterics. It’s been a terrible few days, and just when I thought everything was all right, it went all wrong again, and it was too much for a while. Sit down. I’ll make us some coffee, and you can tell me why you’re here.”

The sheriff watched her bustling around the kitchen, obviously familiar with everything, and told her how he had come to be there.

With the pot heating on the stove, Anne sat down across from him and said, “Noah, my father lied to you. He’s probably realized there were guns in the house and if he came after me himself I

might shoot him. The only way I'll ever go home is if you drag me back in handcuffs, and if you do that, I'll run away again the first chance I get. Now, am I under arrest?"

"Of course not, but you can't stay here with that man. You know that."

"I'm staying here until someone else comes to take care of him. I'd appreciate it if you'd tell the doctor to come as soon as he can. I've never nursed anybody before, and for all I know, I'm making everything worse. And his brothers, would you tell his brothers?"

"I'll tell Frank and Ephraim, and I'll send the doctor out, but you've got to come with me."

"No."

Their eyes met, and Noah was the first to look away. He sighed again. "I think you'd better tell me the whole story."

She did. She told him every bit of it, starting with why she was there.

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Chapter 6

NOAH DID NOT HAVE TIME to stop at Frank Bennett's on the way back to town, or to see Ephraim Bennett when he got back, but he did, as promised, stop at Dr. Craig's. The doctor was out, but Mrs. Craig said she would have her husband go look at Cord first thing in the morning, and also agreed to get word to Ephraim. Satisfied, Noah headed for the courtroom. The defendant in this trial had more money than sense and had hired a Denver lawyer to represent him, so Noah didn't count on seeing Ephraim at the courthouse.

As it happened, Mrs. Craig kept her promise to tell Ephraim by having the doctor stop at the Bennett house on the way out to the ranch in the morning. Ephraim had already left to meet a client, so the doctor gave the message to Ephraim's wife, Martha. But by the time Martha caught up with her husband, he had been cornered by Mrs. Carson, who was good friends with Mrs. Peabody, who had been talking to Reverend Pratt's wife, and Ephraim was heading home almost at a dead run anyway. The story Mrs. Carson had so enjoyed telling Ephraim was how his half-brother had ravished poor Anne Wells and been killed for it.

Ephraim was the oldest of the Bennett brothers and the biggest. He stood several inches over six feet, and had light blond hair and pale blue eyes. Ephraim was usually a slow, gentle, bear-like man, but there was nothing slow or gentle looking about him when Martha found him. The news that Cord was alive did not improve his temper.

"Good," he grated, "Frank and I can kill the son of a bitch ourselves."

ANNE KNEW MASON WAS FORTUNATE to have a doctor such as Daniel Craig. An Easterner born and bred, Craig had put in ten hard years working in the slums of New York City before realizing he could not endure much more struggling against such a tide of human misery. Craig had told Anne that in Mason he found a practice where he felt he was doing some good. His slight build, boyish face, and curly light brown hair helped convince the female half of Mason he was as reliable as old Doc Andrews in no time at all. Anne suspected it didn't hurt that his wife spared no effort to endear herself to the town.

She had hoped Craig's visit would reassure her. It did not. Cord was having periods of lucidity again, and the bleeding had stopped in the night. The doctor listened carefully to what had happened and what Anne had done. He assured her she had done nothing

harmful and had indeed helped. Then he told her as gently as possible that sometimes the human body could cling very tenaciously to life, and that at such times people simply took a long time to die.

"There's nothing you can do? He's just going to die?"

Anne had made sure Dr. Craig realized Cord was not the villain of this tragedy. There was sympathy in the doctor's attitude, but he answered frankly. "I'm not saying I know he's going to die. Every doctor has seen his share of miracles. He wouldn't be alive right now if he weren't stronger than most of us, but you've asked me my opinion, and I don't think his chances are very good."

She had reached the same conclusion herself days ago, but since then hope had taken hold, and now she felt despair. "Will you stop by and see him again?"

"I thought Ephraim and Frank would be here to take him off your hands soon. I stopped at Eph's this morning myself to make sure the family knew."

The thought of help made her try to smile, but that only made her face hurt. "Well, would you plan on coming, and if he's moved or…." She could not say the word, "Someone will get word to you."

"Of course, if I'm out this way for any reason, I'll stop by, and if not, I'll make a point of coming back out in a couple of days. How's that?"

It would have to do. Anne curled up in the rocker again to watch, fighting the fog of misery threatening to envelop her. If only he hadn't made that incredible struggle to the doorway. If he hadn't, they would both be dead, and she knew it.

The barking of the dog she had begun to think of as Foxface woke her sometime later. Anne looked out the front window, hoping to see Frank and Ephraim Bennett, and sure enough there were the two big blond men tying their horses to the porch railing.

Opening the front door, she began to greet them, "I'm so glad to see you, we…," but both men brushed by her as if she didn't exist, heading for the bedroom with long, angry strides. Indignant, Anne chased after them.

Frank was considered the handsome Bennett. Where Ephraim's hair was a pale blond, Frank's was bright gold. Frank was built long and lean, like Cord, and was about the same height, but his open countenance, even features, and laughing deep blue eyes drew people to him instantly. Anne had heard that before he married and settled down, Frank had been quite a ladies' man. She had also heard about his quick temper and was glad he was so angry on Cord's behalf, but she didn't like being ignored.

Cord had been asleep when the doctor arrived and waked only

to pass out during the examination. The sound of his brothers' angry approach brought him awake again. As they charged into the bedroom, Anne tried once more to get their attention, "He really isn't well enough to talk to you much yet…."

Frank turned on her and snarled, "I don't need any excuses from a woman stupid enough to sit out here and nurse the son of a bitch who did that to her face. You just shut up and wait outside. This is a family matter."

By the time he had finished talking, his voice had risen to just short of a yell in the small room, and he didn't lower it as he turned on Cord. "You bastard, you son of a bitch, I keep thinking you can't get any worse, and you keep proving me wrong." Frank's voice lowered to a harsh growl. "Eph thinks we ought to finish you off ourselves and at least take care of the family's own mess right here and now, and maybe he's right, and I suppose you're just going to lay there and pull that goddamn silence crap on us again."

It was obvious to Anne by now that the Bennetts had not come to help and that Frank was just warming up. Things were not going to get better. She left the bedroom as ordered, then went and got the rifle she had talked Noah Reynolds into reloading. Keeping the rifle hidden behind her, she slipped back into the bedroom. Ephraim and Frank were either too busy abusing their half-brother to notice or didn't think she was worthy of notice.

Remembering Cord's instructions of the day before, she put her back to the wall in a corner away from the door. Once in position, she raised the rifle. Frank halted in mid-word, and both he and Ephraim turned full attention on her.

"Get out." She wasn't shouting. She said it in quite a conversational tone.

"Now look, Miss Wells, nobody meant to…."

"Get out." She said it more forcefully this time. "I probably couldn't hit you at any distance, but in this room, I'm quite sure I can blow a large, nasty hole right in your belly, and if you don't turn around and get out of this house in the next few seconds that's exactly what I'm going to do. I've had enough of you and your kind to last me a lifetime. Get out!"

Anne was almost disappointed when Frank turned without another word and walked out of the room. Ephraim followed close behind, and Anne made sure they kept going right through the house, out the front door, and got on their horses.

She slammed the front door and returned to the bedroom, collapsed into the rocker still holding the rifle and looked at Cord. "Your family is almost as delightful as mine." She saw a look in and around his eyes she could only call a smile.

“Frank’s got a bit of a temper.”

“A bit! That was one of the rudest, most offensive performances I’ve ever seen. They didn’t come to help. They think you…. They never even asked….” She broke off, unable to find words to complete a sentence.

“They’ve already decided. They don’t need to ask.” He looked almost gray, drawn and tired beyond bearing.

“Want some water, or some soup stuff?” She saw the slight smile in his eyes again.

“No, just sleep.”

The doctor was wrong. He was not going to die. Dying men do not smile with their eyes. So determined, Anne left for the kitchen to make herself some lunch, thinking it was certainly wonderful how nice and quiet life was out here in the country.

It never even occurred to her that less than a week earlier the thought of running two grown men out of the house with a gun would have been inconceivable.

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Chapter 7

AFTER THAT, LIFE DID BECOME rather peaceful. Dr. Craig was their only visitor, and from him Anne learned that while Frank and Ephraim knew she was still at the ranch, they weren't discussing their brother with anyone. Chattering town folk fell silent the moment any one of the grim-faced Bennetts appeared. Sheriff Reynolds had told the Wells family that Anne refused to come home but that the Bennetts would help her get to Chicago, which Anne knew she had led him to believe because she had thought that was what would happen herself at the time.

She thought of the last letter she'd had from her aunt, describing a planned trip to New York City this fall. The fact that her Aunt Clara wouldn't be home was one of the things she had counted on in her headlong flight to Chicago. Her aunt's servants would let her stay at the house until her aunt returned, and by that time…. Had she mentioned the news in that letter to her father or brother? Neither one paid much attention to such things. Would her mother say anything? Anne prayed not. She also prayed that her father would be a long time realizing that any letter he had sent Aunt Clara with instructions as to his ruined daughter's punishment and rehabilitation was sitting unread in Chicago.

Anne begged Craig not to straighten anyone out. He agreed with a sympathetic smile. "If you think it will help, I won't say a word."

Craig also reported that Charlie Meeks and Lem Samuels had come to him and had bullet wounds treated, but they claimed the wounds were the result of roughhousing out at the Double M. The doctor had also heard that a few days later the Double M men had drawn their pay and moved on, giving no hint as to where they were headed.

They're headed straight to hell, Anne thought, and I hope being shot at by a dead man gives them nightmares every night till they get there.

And so the golden fall days passed. Anne found herself more and more in love with life on the ranch. She was up each morning eagerly, running to the barn in the cold air, talking to each of the animals. She had given them all names, something Cord had never bothered with.

He told her which of the pasture gates to turn the corralled horses out through, so she no longer had their care, and he also instructed her what, how much, and how to feed each animal. Her improvisations in the first dark days had not been too far off, and

nothing had suffered. When Cord asked her about the starved colt in the barn, Anne replied that he was now eating and seemed to be feeling better. Cord gave her a strange look but said nothing. When she asked what had caused the colt's condition, he turned away and gave her no answer.

And that, of course, was the trouble with him. Anne might be absolutely sure the fright stories about this man were untrue, but the fact was he was more often than not unemotional and uncommunicative. It was difficult to get him to give a direct answer to a question. He seemed unable or unwilling to speak more than a few sentences at once, certainly unable to carry on conversation as she knew it.

As a patient, however, he was much easier to care for than she had expected. Her father and brother both turned nasty over a cold or cut, but Cord never complained, never demanded, and made the many things that embarrassed her speechless at first routine by his fatalistic acceptance. He might not talk much, but his occasional dry comments about people and situations they both knew from a lifetime in Mason were so perceptive - and often humorous - that she enjoyed being around him. Nursing him, living in his house, caring for his livestock changed nothing for Anne - she liked Cord Bennett.

The house she already loved. Cord did tell her he had been born in a cabin on the site of what was now the main ranch headquarters. This house had come later, when the ranch began to pay, and the whole family had only lived here a short time, for the house was too small by the time it was completed.

Anne herself was used to larger, finer houses. Aunt Clara lived in what most people would call a mansion, with half a dozen servants to wait on one widow. Her family's house in Mason and those of their friends were also much larger and grander. The decors were somber and stately, the furniture was highly polished and expensive, and nowhere Anne had ever lived made her as happy as this house. It was light, bright, and sunny. Just working in it made her happy. And work she did. She baked bread and the few simple cookie recipes she knew by heart, churned butter, and drastically reduced the chicken population.

When supplies ran low, she imposed upon Dr. Craig to bring some things from town, which he made clear he didn't mind doing at all. Getting the money to reimburse the doctor and pay his fees from the cubbyhole Cord directed her to, she found less than two hundred dollars. She realized then that Cord had been trying to force her to take the bulk of what cash he had before her father had smashed their lives to pieces. How had he planned to make it

through the winter? Anne knew asking would not get her an answer.

By the time three weeks had passed, Cord was able to make it to the kitchen table without help, and the doctor admitted to Anne that this was one of the miracles he had mentioned. Craig told her he had never before seen a man recover from such a beating. Craig said it was just luck that no vital organ had been ruptured. Anne didn't think luck had anything to do with it. In her opinion, the crowd of men kicking at Cord had been so large that they got in each other's way.

Dr. Craig did think some damage other than the slight bump of a broken nose and the thin, crooked scar on Cord's cheekbone was permanent. Anne walked into the bedroom during what would be his last visit in time to hear him say so.

"I suppose you don't have any desire to start a dynasty anyway, but it's just as well."

Embarrassed but not leaving the room, Anne knew exactly which of the many injuries Dr. Craig was referring to. Cord seemed unaffected by this news.

"No heirs, huh?"

"Well, I'm not saying it's impossible, mind you, but usually that much swelling and fever…." The doctor became aware of Anne's presence in the room and broke off.

After Craig left Anne wanted to tell Cord how sorry she was, but couldn't find the words.

CORD ON HIS PART HAD first come to with an all-encompassing fury. Fury at himself for not strapping on a gun the minute he found Anne in his barn. Had he really believed that because he was a Bennett on Bennett land a mob like that would limit itself to threats? He had expected her father to be searching for her with a friend or two if at all, and even after hearing Anne's story, he had underestimated Edward. The Double M men had turned the search party into a lynch mob, but it was Edward's treatment of Anne that had sparked the violence.

Knowing that Anne would tell the truth about being with him, he had believed there would be a lot ugliness, but never expected anyone to try to kill him. Further, he had never imagined anyone subjecting a woman to that kind of abuse. What Edward Wells had done to his own daughter and Anne's courage in refusing to bend to her father's will had almost distracted Cord from what was happening to him.

The hate-driven effort to get to the front door with the pistol had released some of the rage, but he recognized a reflection of his own feelings when Anne drove Frank and Ephraim from the house.

He saw the changes in her and thought he understood them more than she did herself. She was out of a cage and finding her wings. No one would cage her again, and he admired her courage and determination.

As her bruises healed, the swelling subsided, and an abundance of decent food rounded out her face and body to the way he remembered them, he also admired the elegant feminine look of her. And he wanted her with such an intensity he could barely hide it.

It was, he thought bitterly, the most foolish and self-destructive desire he had ever had. He might use the fact that she really had no place to go to have her - once, or for a week, or a month. But Anne was not a woman he could ever really have. Hers was a different world, and she would never be satisfied in his for long. Her reputation was now so ruined as to be non-existent, and she could not go back to her life in Mason if she wanted to. Women would shun her; men would be so disrespectful as to be dangerous. The aunt in Chicago seemed her only real alternative, but the fact that the aunt was Edward Wells' sister worried him.

Maybe if he could convince her to stay it wouldn't be the worst thing for her, but then if he had a decent bone in his body he should talk her into letting Frank and Ephraim help her. Cord would as soon be tied down for Meeks and his friends again as to have to actually explain to his brothers he wasn't either a woman-beater or a rapist, but if that was the only way to get her help he would. He sure as hell wasn't going to let her go off on her own with twenty dollars.

In fact, it was already becoming unthinkable that she would leave at all and he would no longer be able to covertly study the gentle sway of her walk or the delicate lines of her face. His pulse would no longer quicken watching the thrust of a breast, the graceful curve of her neck, back, and buttocks. The house would no longer be filled with the smells of baking bread and cookies, the sound of her laughter, humming, and occasionally, when she thought he was asleep, song.

When after weeks he was finally able to get out of the bedroom, he sat at the kitchen table, keeping busy any way possible, peeling potatoes, turning the handle on the paddle butter churn, or repairing bits of harness and saddlery he had Anne bring in from the barn. The worn books on the shelves had been his father's, and he reread parts of them, but they didn't hold his interest. Being up didn't help at all. He watched her working around the kitchen and the desire just grew like a wild thing with a will of its own. Logic was most definitely losing the battle with lust.

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Chapter 8

MORE THAN A MONTH HAD passed when Cord decided he could make it to the barn and back. He wanted to see the sick colt, for he didn't believe Anne that the colt was alive, much less well. It was as good as dead the last time he saw it. Anne was vocal about her lack of faith he could make it back from the barn and furious that he wouldn't wait a few more days. By now he was used to her quick temper over such things. He ignored her.

"You'll make it out there all right, but you won't make it back, and I'm not dragging you again. You can spend the whole day right where you fall, so help me."

He kept walking.

"Drat you, maybe I'll shove you in the wheelbarrow and just dump you back in the house."

She was berating his back and finally gave up and ran to catch him. He knew by now she wouldn't stay mad for long and in fact would probably be smiling in minutes. He suppressed every emotion. She suppressed none.

His ribs and belly were already a dull ache by the time he got to the colt's stall, and he held onto the stall partition for support, wanting to disbelieve his eyes. "How did you do it?"

"Do what?"

"That colt was as good as dead. I should have shot him. How did you get him to eat?"

The look on Anne's face told him he had given away how much he wanted to know, and her words set the price for the answer. "I'll tell you how I did it, if you'll tell me how he got like that."

Cord glared at her, knowing full well it wouldn't have any effect. "All right."

"Come on, you'd better sit somewhere or I really will have to use the wheelbarrow."

They sat facing each other on overturned buckets, leaning back against stall walls. Anne told him about the sugar, how the colt had eventually given in and eaten a bit willingly. The next day she had made a thin sugar syrup and laced it in his grain and poured it in thin streams over the hay. She also confessed freely to the talking and petting. She called the colt Fortune and wanted to know about him.

She looked at him expectantly, waiting for him to keep his half of the bargain. Chewing on a bit of hay, he said, "I had a deal with Alferd Lathrum, over north of Grenerton, you know?"

Everyone in Mason knew of Lathrum, who raised quality blood

horses but was reputed to be a cruel man. Anne nodded.

Cord continued, “He cheated me by selling me a dead colt is all. And you cheated him by keeping the colt alive.” He then rose unsteadily to his feet and headed back for the house.

He knew perfectly well that Anne felt he had broken their tit for tat bargain and was angry. This was a cold fury very different from the fast passing little displays of temperament. Worst of all, he knew he had made her think seriously about leaving. Over lunch he asked her, “When will you leave?”

Her voice was cool. “As soon as you can take care of the animals yourself.”

“Money?”

“None of your business.” After that she was pleasant, considerate, and too polite.

By the next morning he wanted to shake her until she begged for mercy, but he had certainly seen that that didn’t work. Over polite protests, he walked with her to the barn for morning chores. He made no effort to try to pitch hay, carry grain or water, but quietly milked the cows, now named Daisy and Rose. When everything was taken care of in the barn, he said, “All right, sit down. I’ll tell you.”

He was not used to story-telling and spoke slowly with many long pauses.

“You know I was gone from here some of the same years you were.”

Anne nodded. She was leaning towards him, lips parted, wide-eyed and eager to hear it all. Maybe telling this wasn’t going to be so bad after all.

“I had some extra cash when I first got back and thought to use it for a young stallion bred some better than the stock I’ve got, so I went to see Lathrum.”

Anne tried to hurry him. “So you bought a horse from him?”

“Nope. He wasn’t too keen on competition. Got downright nasty. I heard later he was even making buyers promise not to resell to me.”

Cord shrugged, but it pleased him that Anne’s mouth tightened. There was no doubt whose side she was on already.

“Not too long after that word got around he’d had a fancy palomino foal born over there. You know the color?”

“Golden. They really are pretty.”

“Mm. Unusual color out of his stock. He was offered a lot of money for it right from the start, but being a greedy bastard he figured he’d get more when it was grown and broke.”

A few weeks ago Anne would have had a ladylike fit over his

language, but her attitudes had toughened some in the past weeks. Now she only rarely tried to rebuke him by wrinkling her nose or frowning. Hurrying him with his tale was obviously her only interest at the moment. “So?”

“So when the colt got old enough Raoul started working with him and couldn’t get a thing done.”

“Who’s Raoul?”

“Raoul Zamora, Lathrum’s head horseman. He’s good with a horse, but he uses Spanish methods - harsh - and Lathrum pushes him to where some of it gets pretty ugly. Hate to think what they probably did to that yellow horse, but that stud beat them - they couldn’t get him broke. So they asked around and tried some of the men known for horse taming and that kind of thing. Horse almost killed a man last fall. It was still winning.”

“Didn’t they consider a surgical solution?”

Her delicate way of alluding to castration amused him, and her blush said she knew it, but she was still leaning toward him, eager to hear the rest of the story.

“Gelding might be worth two hundred dollars. He was offered thousands for that yellow horse, entire and broke.”

“I see.”

“So when he’d exhausted all reasonable possibilities, Lathrum came to me. Offered to let me have the pick of his next crop of foals if I could get the horse broke. He’s every kind of mean I’ve ever heard about, but he has a reputation for keeping his word, so I said I’d give it a try.”

Anne leaned back a little and tilted her head at him, understanding at last how Fortune came into this.

“That horse was one useless son of a bitch. If he’d been any other color nobody would have even gelded him - they’d have shot him. Took all fall and winter, but he was broke enough for a careful man who knew what he was doing by spring, so I took him back and looked over Lathrum’s foals and picked this one.” He nodded toward Fortune’s stall.

“It surprised me a little Lathrum didn’t try to hide one that good. Seemed like he really was keeping his word. Said he weaned all the foals in late September, to come back in October, to let them know and they’d have the colt caught up. What they gave me was what you saw in the barn a month ago. I got back with him the afternoon before you got here. A day earlier and you’d have been meeting one of Frank’s hands over here to take care of the stock.”

Their eyes met, both knowing how very different their lives might be if that had happened.

Anne couldn’t understand or accept it. “You mean they did it on

purpose? What did they do?"

"Lathrum left Raoul to face me, and he was so damned embarrassed he didn't say much. Probably weaned him too early and kept him half-starved right up till I sent word I was coming for him, then stopped feeding him at all. Felt sure I should have shot him right there out of kindness but it seemed wrong to even leave them the body, so I nursed him home. Took three days to come thirty miles. The light was gone from his eyes."

"I don't understand. What does that mean?"

"It's a dead look in the eyes they get when the will to live is gone. They don't eat even with food in front of them then. So, you see, Lathrum tried to cheat me, and you cheated him."

"Will Fortune be all right now?"

"Might never be as good a horse as he would have. Stunted, crooked legs, something like that, but it won't make any difference in what he'll be as a sire, and that's what I wanted him for."

Anne sat frowning into space, and Cord wondered if he had capitulated too late and she would not let go of her anger. She reassured him with a smile after a moment, and said, "It's strange, isn't it. I'm having trouble believing a man could be so cruel to a horse, and yet look what men did to us."

To us. He hadn't thought of it that way before. "Will you tell me now what you're going to do when you leave here?"

She stood, brushing her skirt. "Yes, but inside. It's too cold to sit here any longer," and then she threw him a quick grin and added, "if you'll tell me how you were going to get through the winter if I'd taken your hundred and fifty dollars."

Then he was watching her back for a change as she carried the pail of milk to the house. It galled him to let her do it, but he knew better than to even think about lifting anything yet. How, he wondered, was he going to get her to stay for a while, and how was he going to deal with the emptiness when she left, no matter when it was?

In the house, Anne said, "This time you first."

She had him, and he knew it. "I just borrow enough from Frank to get by when things get tight. I've done it a couple of times over the years."

Her feelings were in her voice. "From your *brother* Frank?"

"Mm, hm. Really impressed you didn't he? After he stops yelling he's a good man, you know. Best thing for you would be to ask Frank and Eph for help. They could see you live decently while you work things out."

She sat down across from him at the kitchen table and said, harking back to that long ago conversation, "I'd rather whore for

strangers."

Cord knew it was not a good opening, but it was time to get it out. "Would you stay?"

"You mean would I whore for you?"

"No, damn it, I seem to remember we're married."

"That farce of a ceremony didn't mean a thing, and you know it."

"What it means is up to us. If we mean to keep those vows, we're married."

"That's easy to say, but nobody else would feel that way. I would be just a whore as far as the rest of the world is concerned, and I'd feel like one."

"We could talk to Pratt."

"I don't want to talk to that yellow-bellied holy coward."

"Bet I could get a marriage certificate out of him."

Her narrow-eyed look said she wouldn't take that bet and she didn't think much of a marriage certificate obtained at gun point.

He hadn't really expected her to say yes. He backed off. "All right then, what are you going to do, you and your twenty dollars?"

"Well, I can't go to Aunt Clara now, so I'll just find employment. I'm a very good seamstress, and an excellent cook, and most people think I'm way too educated for a woman. I could teach."

"Great. When you're almost out of money and about to get to the whoring, save enough to send me a telegram. I'd like to be your first customer."

"That's what I thought you had in mind. It's not exactly the same thing as marriage."

"It's probably a bigger part of marriage than you'd like."

Anne ignored that. "Can I think about this romantic proposal for a while, or do I have to answer now?"

She could think about it forever if it kept her from leaving. "Think all you like," he said, and took his aching belly off for a nap. Sleep didn't come easily.

* * *

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Chapter 9

ANNE DID THINK ABOUT IT. Thought about little else for the next several days until her head ached and she felt dizzy following her own thoughts in circles. She gave no consideration to the social stigma that had only weeks ago kept her from even considering Cord as marriageable. The pressures of the opinion of polite society were responsible for almost forcing her into marriage to a man she found repulsive. She had been condemned for a sin she had not committed and was surprised to realize it only set her free.

In spite of how difficult he could be, she liked Cord far more than she ever had either Elroy or Richard. He was in many ways easier to be around than anyone she had ever known. If she wanted help or advice, he gave it, but he saw no need to force her to do things his way or to dominate her every action and word. More than ever before she realized how much Richard and his friends had patronized her.

Yet Cord was disturbing in a way no other had ever been. The sound of his voice, the sight of him, the way he looked at her, sometimes any of these things would cause an unsettling thump in her chest, a strange flutter in her stomach. She would find herself admiring the skill in his hands as they performed some ordinary task, the long, strong fingers unusually quick and dexterous, or watching him walk, even still slightly favoring his ribs, exhibiting a sensuous, cat-like grace.

She had been engaged to Richard Tyler, an extremely good-looking man, for four years, but could not remember ever noticing how he walked, could not remember anything about his hands. Recalling Richard at all was difficult, but the picture in her mind was a pale, bland, even featured image, lacking the ferocity but also the strength, confidence, and character of the distinctive bone structure and planes of Cord's face.

Anne accepted that his reason for asking her to stay was exactly what he stated. Under ordinary circumstances, there were no decent women a man like Cord Bennett could marry. Then again, Anne thought ruefully, no one who knew the turns her life had taken these last weeks would consider her a decent woman.

She worried particularly about the physical part of marriage. Anne's knowledge had all been obtained from her married friend, Rachel Miles Ross. Neither her mother nor her Aunt Clara had ever been willing to say much on the subject. What they did say tended to be heavy on words like duty and obligation.

Rachel had described the marital act to Anne in minute detail.

According to Rachel, the first time had been so terrible she was at first afraid she would die and then afraid she wouldn't. After that, Rachel said, it was merely like being torn apart.

Anne watched Rachel change from a girl so in love she couldn't talk about anything except her beloved Randal to an unhappy woman who almost hated her husband and wanted to become pregnant because, "Then he'll have to leave me alone."

Rachel's experiences had made Anne understand why women whispered about a woman's burden. Most wives, of course, seemed to manage much better than Rachel did. Anne had been confident that that part of marriage to Richard would be distasteful, but not so dreadful as what her friend endured.

Still, Randal Ross was a gentleman. If he subjected his wife to such agonizing misery regularly, what on earth would marriage to a man of such raw power as Cord be like? The thought of him touching her like that gave her an unsettling hollow feeling in her stomach.

What would it be like being married to a man who had to be bribed into saying more than a few laconic sentences? He would not try to rule her or control her, but he wouldn't be affectionate or caring either. What would it be like to live a whole lifetime with a man so withdrawn? A man whose own family believed he was a criminal?

There was also what she had overheard Dr. Craig say about children. She had never envisioned marriage without children. If she never married, there would be none, but to be in a loveless marriage and not even have children to fuss over and love?

But there was no escaping the fact she wanted to stay. She loved it here and loved the life. Would that all change too if they were married?

And what of the other way? If she did go off and find a position somewhere, what would her life be like? Would it be better? Worse? After three days of almost constant headaches, she deliberately refused to even think about it for another day.

After her day of mentally avoiding the subject, Anne woke in the morning with the decision clear in her mind. She really wanted to stay - with this man, in his life. If he would give her the assurances she needed, she would stay, and she would do her absolute best to be as good a wife as possible, living without what she already knew she could not have without resentment.

Then she approached him. "Did you mean it?"

"Yeah, I did."

"I need your solemn word of honor. When we get to town we'll get a regular certificate of marriage, and we will keep the vows

absolutely as if we made them willingly at the time."

"I will if you will."

Anne bit her lip and took a deep breath, "I give you my word."

"And I give you mine. Suppose this means I get everything except obey."

She gasped, "You *noticed!*"

"Yeah, I noticed. If I can have to have and to hold, you can do anything else you damn well please. I don't need to boss you around."

"I'll keep that in mind."

She felt self-conscious and nervous around him the rest of the day. He had more stamina and could do more all the time, but she knew his ribs were still giving him trouble. Although he had cut the strapping off himself days ago and refused to discuss the matter, discomfort showed in the way he stood and walked when it got bad. He still took a nap once or twice a day. He admitted no weakness, but Anne would often see the sudden onset of the drained, exhausted look. So that night when she started for the front bedroom, and heard, "Where are you going?" she looked at him with disbelief.

"To bed."

"Wives sleep with their husbands."

"But you can't…."

"No, I can't, but I can anticipate. Come on along."

"I need to… fix my hair and things. I'll be right there." What she needed was time to adjust to the idea, and his eyes showed he knew it.

In the front bedroom she took down her hair and ran her fingers through it. The only comb in the house was in his - their - bedroom. She took off her clothes and put on his shirt that she was still using as a nightgown. It only hung halfway to her knees and was frightfully immodest. She suddenly remembered the morning he had made her take it off and looked at the bruises. Oh, Lord, what had she agreed to, what had she done? Straightening her shoulders, she headed slowly for the back bedroom.

The lamp beside the bed was turned low, and Cord was in the bed, covers only to his waist. The dim light gave a burnished glow to his skin, highlighting some curves of bone and muscle, shadowing others, and only emphasized the latent power of his body, drawn thin by the recent illness. One quick peek left her knees shaking, yet she was drawn across the room as if compelled by some outside force. He opened the covers, and after blowing out the lamp, she slipped under them. Immediately his hands were on the front of the shirt, unbuttoning.

She jerked away. “What do you think you’re doing? Stop that.”

“Taking the shirt off you.”

“Oh, no, you’re not. It’s not decent.”

“Fine, you take it off.”

She was close to tears already. “It’s not proper to sleep without a nightgown.”

“Shit.” He turned on his back staring at the ceiling in the darkness. “You take off that damned shirt and leave it off, or get the hell out of here and you can have your word right back.”

Tears spilled slowly across Anne’s cheeks. Rachel was certainly right about this monstrous business, and it hadn’t even really started yet. She took off the shirt.

What shocked her was his gentleness. He explored every bit of her, stroking lightly, his mouth occasionally nuzzling her shoulder. His touch made her aware of the hollows and curves, dips and swells of her own body as never before. Her skin came alive under his warm hands. Barely breathing herself, Anne finally realized he had fallen asleep, curved behind her, one hand cupping her breast and the other spread on her stomach.

She lay awake much longer, wondering how he could speak so roughly and touch so gently, wondering why Rachel had never mentioned that some of this was rather nice, and wondering what it would be like when he was better.

Within a few days Cord was almost crazed with frustration. Anne had been raised with so much modesty and propriety drummed into her she thought sleeping naked was a sin. She did her best to get that damn shirt on every morning as fast as she could so he couldn’t even feast his eyes on her. There was absolutely no way a woman such as this was going to cooperate enough to help him have the release he needed. The black fatigue that hit him like a hammer after only a relatively short time of arousal and his aching ribs and stomach combined to keep him from taking what would be available if he were healthy.

Worst of all, there was a wariness in Anne’s eyes that had never been there before. Her total lack of fear of him was one of the uniquely attractive things about her. She was not yet afraid, but there was something. Probably in another week when he was up to strength she would run to Grenerton, screaming all the way, and maybe, he thought cynically, it would be the best thing for both of them.

Anne knew he was angry with her. He had gone from short answers of only a few words to barely grunting in reply to questions or comments. He undoubtedly was disappointed in her. Having touched her so intimately he was probably just realizing her too tall

body was also too slim and shapeless. Men liked soft, round women like Rachel. Well, it was just too bad. He was stuck with her.

Even if she had married the Chicago fiance, Cord decided, she would never have been a passionate woman. The man had obviously struck no sparks or she would have abandoned some of the prudish modesty. Probably genteel people like that coupled as neatly and properly as they did everything else.

However, knowing that fantasies of her eager and willing under him were only that - fantasies - did not make him want her less. The problem was to find a way to bury himself in the slim body without hurting her, disgusting her, or repelling her so thoroughly that once would be all he'd ever have. He spent a lot of time thinking over the stories he had heard from Frank back in his brother's womanizing days.

Sleeping with him was going to be one of the best things about marriage, Anne decided. She liked the feel of the work roughened hands petting and exploring her, liked falling asleep curled in his arms and waking up against him. He did this as silently as he did everything else, and she found herself wistfully wishing he would kiss her or murmur a few soft words, even if he didn't mean them. She reminded herself sternly of her pledge to be satisfied with what she could have.

She also liked the way his mouth traced patterns on her neck and shoulders and across her collarbones and having his hand cup a breast, thumb rubbing a nipple. However, when his head slipped to her breast and she felt his lips and tongue there, surprise caused her to stiffen and pull away. He didn't do it again, and the memory of the second of intense pleasure caused her much regret, but she was not brave enough to say anything.

Cord was still taking a nap in the middle of the day, and Anne relaxed in his arms at night, expecting only the usual pleasurable caresses. Sometimes by the light of day, she looked at herself in the mirror and blushed thinking of the places and ways he touched her. She spent considerable time daydreaming about kisses and tender words, but now she lay on her side facing him in the darkness, eyes closed, a slight smile on her lips as his fingers circled gently on the soft skin of her inner thigh.

Astonishment did not break through the languor in time for her to react when he pushed a finger inside her, spreading the secret moisture that his touch always caused, and then pulled her against him, slipping her upper leg over his thigh and thrusting into her. She felt tearing pain, a dull bruising ache as her body opened. He pulled away slightly then plunged deeper.

Accepting in her mind what was happening, Anne was as

motionless as a frightened small animal, waiting for the horror to begin, but even as he began to move in her, the initial pain receded. As her expectation of more pain lessened, so did her tense stillness, and when she began to relax, his hands guided her hips.

Anne tentatively relaxed completely just before Cord shuddered and she felt hot wetness deep inside, and then she was separate again. He had pulled right away from her, rolling onto his back, and his voice was very soft and low. “You all right?”

“Yes.” Of course she was all right. It *had* hurt, but she didn’t feel particularly torn apart. Goodness, she could stand this without any trouble at all.

He was facing her again now. “More?”

Asking her - he was *asking* her. Weren’t his animal appetites supposed to turn him into a ravening beast?

This time he slid easily into the depths of her that were already drenched with his seed, and there was only the shadow of the first pain. Anne lay quietly beside him until she was sure he was asleep, then gently pillowed her head on his shoulder and cupped her hand around his upper arm. Surely this much was her marital right.

Rachel’s description of this act had been accurate, she reflected, except for the position, which she supposed was a concession to his ribs. But where was the unbearable pain, where was the humiliation? It was inexpressibly intimate, and she didn’t mind a bit. Why did she want to laugh out loud with relief? If this was her marital burden it was certainly going to be easy to bear.

Cord woke first. Eyes shut, he could feel her against him, cheek against his shoulder, breasts pushing against his arm, one hand across his treacherous rib cage. At least she hadn’t thrown on clothes and run off into the night. God, he’d forgotten how good it felt, blood no longer boiling through his veins like hot acid but slipping along sweetly like warm honey, all the tense misery gone, replaced by an ease that reached to his bone marrow.

Would she realize now what she had done to herself and leave? Would he look into the wide gray eyes this morning and finally see fear? He wasn’t sure he wanted to know the answers. As the world began to turn rose colored with the sunrise, he pulled carefully away from her, dressed, and went to start coffee.

Listening hard for any stirring in the bedroom, he heard her bare feet on the floor, then sounds of a sharply indrawn breath - maybe even a very soft wail - and cloth rustling.

He didn’t want to know but couldn’t help going to see. She was leaning over the bed in his shirt, hurriedly pulling off the bedclothes. The sight of the long bare legs and rounded bottom fully captured his attention.

Suddenly aware of his presence, Anne straightened quickly, tugging at the hem of the shirt.

The bloodstain on the exposed bed sheet made Cord forget everything else, including his worry about whether she was afraid. “Why the hell didn’t you tell me you were a goddamn virgin?”

Her embarrassment changed to indignation in a flash. She snapped at him, “Tell you? Why on earth would I tell you such a thing? You know I’ve never been married before.”

“What the hell has married got to do with it? You were engaged for years to that man in Chicago.”

Her voice started to rise. “The operative word there is ‘engaged.’ What kind of trash do you think I am?”

“I think you’re human is all. What was the matter with him?”

She tried haughtiness. “There was nothing wrong with him. He was a gentleman.”

“Gentleman my ass. He must have had ice water for blood.”

It never, of course, occurred to him to blame anyone except Richard for such an extraordinary state of affairs.

Her voice dropped, low and furious. “Well, it’s just too bad if you had your heart set on a used, well broken in wife, because you’re stuck with me.”

The unfairness of this made Cord growl right back, “I didn’t want a used wife. If I’d known, I wouldn’t have slammed into you like that is all.”

He turned and stomped back to the kitchen, starting to bang the coffee pot down on the stove and then placing it instead slowly and with care. Not only was there no fear in her eyes this morning, the disturbing wary look was gone.

Anne watched his disappearing back open mouthed. Slammed into her? For the first time it occurred to her that Rachel’s highly respected, much admired, and widely envied husband might just be severely lacking in some regards.

* * *

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Chapter 10

SOMETIMES ANNE HAD TROUBLE BELIEVING so much pain and misery had in the end brought her so much freedom. Cord really didn't boss her around. He left what she did and when she did it entirely up to her. If she didn't know how to do something, he showed her. If she made a mistake, he shrugged and helped her fix it.

So every morning she followed him to the barn, the two of them doing chores in half the time it took one alone. After breakfast, Anne did household tasks, amazed that he helped. He didn't seem to divide the world into men's work and women's work. Of course, she realized, he was used to doing it all himself.

He began to work horses again, starting with young stock that would benefit from quiet handling, since he still was not ready to start riding. Anne spent most afternoons outside with him, trying not to get in the way, imitating the way he did things and petting and brushing the young horses herself. Sometimes hours would pass with only a few words spoken to the horses, but she delighted in every minute of it.

When Cord suggested she should learn how to handle his guns, Anne hesitated at first, then remembered Charlie Meeks' leering face and agreed. Mastering how to clean, oil, and load the weapons came easy. Hitting what she aimed at was a different story, but she could see herself slowly improving as the days passed, and after all, she didn't need to be a sharp shooter, just competent.

After evening chores and dinner, Anne prepared for the next day's baking or sewed loose buttons or little rents or worn places in her few clothes that were wearing out so rapidly. Cord cleaned and oiled harness, saddles, and bridles or made minor repairs to other equipment.

At night Anne slept curled against Cord's shoulder, utterly content with a new life that was better than anything she had ever imagined or dared hope for.

For Cord there was no ease. Most nights he lay awake long after Anne was asleep, wondering how long she would stay, wondering what price he would pay for stealing this time with her.

Because he believed the first time Anne was back in Mason, she might just decide to run home or to Rachel Ross, he put off any mention of a trip to town as long as possible. He also was not sure she really understood how much of a pariah she would be now with most of the townspeople or how she would react to the loss of lifetime friends and maybe even her family.

The fact was, though, by early December they were almost out of everything, from grain for the livestock, to flour, sugar, and coffee. Mentioning going to town as if he expected her to stay home got him nowhere.

"I figure to take the wagon into town for supplies first thing in the morning," he said. "If you feed the stock, I'll do the rest of the chores when I get back."

She tipped her head and looked at him as if she knew what he was up to. "What if I want to come with you?"

He suppressed a sigh. "We'll leave a little later."

"Good," Anne said. "We need to make sure we're really married, even if it does mean seeing Reverend Yellow-Belly Pratt again."

A pistol was not Cord's favorite weapon, but the next morning he strapped on the gunbelt before going to hitch up the wagon.

Pulling up in front of Pratt's house, Cord asked, "You sure you don't want to stay here?"

Every line of Anne's face and body said she did, but she shook her head and climbed down. It was Sarah Pratt who answered the door and stood in the doorway wooden with fear. Charles Pratt walked up behind his wife to see who had come calling and turned sickly pale and began to back up.

Cord spoke very politely, "Like to see you a minute privately, Reverend."

With a shaking hand, Pratt gestured to a door off the hall. Anne had to about push Mrs. Pratt to get by her, but the woman leapt out of the way as soon as Cord took a step. In his study, Pratt tried to ignore Cord. "Anne, what is the meaning of this? What are you doing here with that man?"

Hoarse with fury, she said, "I'm here with my *husband* to get the marriage certificate you seem to have forgotten the day you married us."

Pratt seemed to get even paler and began to stutter. "T-that w-wasn't… you c-can't…."

Cord leaned back against a wall, opened his coat to be sure the gunbelt showed, and let her vent her anger.

Anne was almost spitting. "You craven, yellow, useless, sad excuse for a Christian, you did the marrying, you can just find enough spine to write the certificate."

"Anne, y-your f-father…."

"Damn my father, and damn you. For once in your cowardly life you can just do what's right."

Pratt was beginning to look distinctly ill, so Cord decided to take a hand.

“Actually, Reverend, we sort of figured you’d be happy to make things right. You know, earn redemption through a good deed.”

Charles Pratt was a whispy man, and Cord thought of him as gray all over. Gray hair, gray skin, indeterminate colored eyes behind spectacles - now as Pratt finally looked at him, Cord wondered if he was right about the preacher’s blood slowly turning from red to a thin, gray gruel.

“R-redemption?”

“Yeah, you know, forgiveness.” Cord didn’t intend the threat of the word to be subtle, and it wasn’t.

Pratt crumbled. “It needs witnesses.”

“Benton and White were both there. Maybe they’d be interested in a little redemption too.”

The preacher was holding onto his desk as if he knew he would fall without the support. “All right,” he whispered, “I’ll get them.”

“That’s real considerate of you, Reverend. Suppose we meet you back here at noon.”

Pratt didn’t raise his head again, but nodded.

Giving Pratt that much time worried Anne. Back at the wagon, she said, “You’ve given him two hours to round up help and make trouble.”

“He hasn’t got that much sand.”

Anne climbed back on the wagon seat, hoping he was right. Cord stopped next in front of a small shop off of Main Street. It was Armand LeClerc’s goldsmith shop, she knew, but she didn’t understand right away. When the bell sounded as they walked in, Mr. LeClerc bounced to his feet from the armchair behind the counter. He was a small, round, white-haired man, and he smiled widely at them. “What can I do for you two today?”

“We need a wedding ring,” Cord said.

Anne made no attempt to hide her delight, as LeClerc pulled a tray with various sized gold bands out of a drawer. She examined them with uncritical pleasure.

Cord wasn’t as pleased. He said, “They sure look plain. Don’t you make anything prettier?”

This time she felt dismay. Didn’t he realize prettier meant more expensive? She knew exactly how much money they had. Perhaps she could pretend not to like any of the more expensive rings.

LeClerc left the first tray on the counter and pulled out a second. The problem with pretending was that she wasn’t very good at it. Some of these rings were definitely too gaudy, some were designed so that they would not be practical for ranch life, but some were undeniably special.

“Pick one you like.”

Did he seriously think he was going to borrow money from his wretched brother to get through the winter in order to buy her a fancy ring? She knew better than to argue with him in front of Mr. LeClerc. She began sorting through the rings. First she eliminated the gaudy, then the impractical. She was left with four rings and hesitated, sure she preferred the most expensive.

Armand LeClerc spoke as if he understood the problem. Perhaps he did. He had been selling jewelry for many years. “Very wise choices, my dear. Some of my own favorites, and I made them all. The price won’t choose for you since those four are all the same.”

Anne smiled at him gratefully and picked up her favorite. Three slim strands of gold entwined on the top, merging into one band underneath the finger.

The ring didn’t fit, and Mr. LeClerc explained that he had plain bands in all sizes, but each of the unique rings had to be sized for the person who would wear it.

“But we’re only in town today.”

“If you can wait an hour or two, I can have it perfect.”

She glanced at Cord to see what his reaction to all this was. “We have nothing to do till noon anyway. We can wait.”

“In that case,” said Mr. LeClerc, “why don’t you come to my shop and keep me company while I do the work. If you don’t mind indulging an old man and listening to him ramble on.”

Anne was surprised when Cord agreed but realized his dual purpose when after a short time he excused himself and disappeared to the barber’s for a much needed haircut. He returned promptly enough and soon Mr. LeClerc was entertaining them with stories of his boyhood in France as he heated the ring in his small forge. Anne could never decide later which was the more fascinating, the work he did or the stories he told.

Before the ring was ready, Helene LeClerc, as small and round as her husband, was serving them coffee, joining them for a while and letting the shop keep itself. The ring would be even more precious because of the happy time that went with it.

Cooled and polished again, the ring fit perfectly. Back in the shop, Mr. LeClerc asked, “And do you want a man’s ring too?” Anne knew she had not kept her face from showing what she thought of that.

She absolutely expected, however, to hear Cord say no, and was delighted all over again to hear him say instead, “How much?” After very little discussion, they left the shop with both rings in Cord’s pocket - and with new friends.

Pulling up in front of Pratt’s again just before noon, Cord fished the rings from his pocket and said, “I don’t suppose you want to put

this on in there?"

She grinned at him. "You don't suppose right."

She pulled off the awkward glove she had made for herself out of an old pair of his and held out her left hand. After he slipped the ring on her finger, she held out her hand for the other ring and did the same for him. She smiled at him, feeling light-hearted with happiness and saw the answering smile in his eyes. Suddenly she wanted very much to throw her arms around him and kiss him thoroughly but was sure he wouldn't like it a bit and didn't. They climbed down and headed for the house.

Mrs. Pratt was nowhere to be seen. Reverend Pratt answered the door himself and wordlessly led the way to his study again. Michael Benton and Thomas White sat on the edges of their chairs. Both men got quickly to their feet when Cord and Anne walked in the room, looking very much like they wanted to dive through the window.

Pratt, either emboldened by the presence of White and Benton or having found a modicum of courage somewhere, started in, "Now, Anne, you must realize you don't have to stay with this man because of what's happened. I'm sure your father would be happy to have you home, or you could go to Sheriff Reynolds. You can't do this to yourself because of an unfortunate turn of events."

Anne had decided these men weren't worth her emotion. "It has nothing to do with have to, and as far as I'm concerned it was a fortunate turn of events. Now, if you don't mind, we've got other things to do today."

Pratt sat behind the desk with resignation and began to fill out the scrolled, engraved form. When he finished writing, he turned the certificate toward Anne and said, "You sign your maiden name."

She did and then handed the pen to Cord.

Pratt said, "If you make your mark, I'll print it in below."

Cord didn't even look up, just signed, "Cord Bennett" in a strong hand. White and Benton then signed.

Cord wasn't through with them yet. "I think we'd all like to see this written in the church records, Reverend." Pratt sputtered and delayed but ended up pulling out the marriage records and entering their names and the October date.

"You have a fee for this sort of thing, Reverend?"

"N-no. People donate what they can."

"Mm. How about a fee for seeing that this is written down in the courthouse records like everybody else?"

"There's a small fee. You can take the certificate and…."

Cord threw a dollar on the desk and his voice went softer and menacing, "I suppose if we check at the courthouse next time we're

in town, we'll find it in the records?"

"Yes, yes, of course. I'll see that it's done right away."

"Good, because we'll check." Cord then politely tipped his hat to each of the men. "Thank you, Reverend. Mr. White, Mr. Benton."

Anne saw no reason to disguise her contempt. She gave them all dirty looks and then walked out.

When he pulled up in front of James Miles' General Store, Anne explained to Cord she would like to go in alone while he went to the feed store. James Miles was Rachel's father and had been like an uncle to her all her life. She was hoping to talk to him and to have him understand and sell them goods without Cord even coming in.

She sensed his reluctance, but all he said was, "Hurt's worse when your friends get mean."

"I know, but I want to try. If it doesn't work, I'll wait for you outside."

When James Miles caught sight of her, his long narrow face lit up. "Anne, I didn't know you had come home. It's good to see you. Are you all right? How are you?"

She smiled back but asked quietly, "Mr. Miles, can I talk with you alone a minute?"

Puzzled, Miles made the familiar gesture of smoothing his black hair over the little bald spot. Then he gestured to his assistant to take over and led the way to the storeroom in the back of the store. They sat face to face on wooden crates while Anne told James Miles the story she had told Sheriff Reynolds quickly and concisely.

She finished with, "So, you see, Mr. Miles, I'm here with my husband for supplies. I know I can't ever be friends with your family the way it's been in the past, but I'm hoping we can still at least be friends."

Miles tried to argue with her. "You can't be serious about this. No matter what's happened you know you have friends who will help you. You don't have to live out there with that, that…."

Anne felt a small curl of anger begin but squelched it. She didn't want to lose this friend. "That *man* is my husband, and he's a much better husband than I ever thought I'd have. I like him."

He looked at her in dismay, but Anne could tell her story had moved him.

"You know Randal will never even let Rachel say hello to you in the street and a lot of others will feel the same?"

"Yes, I know. I'll be grateful if you aren't one of those others." Everything has a price thought Anne.

"All right, then. You have a list?"

She felt relief surge through her, and as they walked out of the storeroom, stopped and hugged him. "Thank you."

He patted her shoulder. “Now, now, that’s enough of that. I just hope you know what you’re doing.”

The store was beginning to fill with women who didn’t seem to need to buy anything. Anne realized word was spreading that she was in town with Cord, and every busybody was eager to find out what was going on for herself.

Miles began to pull the items on the list from his shelves, and Anne shopped around, picking up other items on the list and, guiltily, a few that weren’t. Finally, she had everything, and she headed for the counter while Miles began to total the bill.

Beside her she heard the shrewish voice of Emma Wilkinson, the most vicious of the town harpies. “Surely, James, you’re not going to wait on an Injun’s woman while decent folk wait.” It was not put as a question.

Miles looked up and said, “Now, Emma, there are circumstances….”

Mrs. Wilkinson didn’t wait for him to finish but interrupted. “There are no such thing as ‘circumstances,’ and you know it. A decent woman would choose death.”

No one had heard Cord pad in on moccasined feet. His voice was extra polite but very clear and carried over the whole store. “Mrs. Wilkinson, you’d never have to make a choice. My grandfather was an ignorant, illiterate savage, but if he’d captured you, he’d have just slit your throat. Even an ignorant savage knows better than to fuck a bitch.”

Mrs. Wilkinson’s face turned deep puce and she seemed to be gasping for air. Anne was afraid for a moment that the woman would faint at her feet, but with a strangled sound Emma ran from the store as if pursued by furies.

Trying very hard to keep a giggle inside, Anne peeked up to see Miles frowning at her.

Cord’s voice came again, drawling, but still clear, “I didn’t think a *decent woman* would even know what I was talking about.”

Still meeting James Miles’ disapproving gaze, Anne lost control, and the giggle escaped.

Still frowning slightly, Miles said, “Anne, girl, I sure hope you know what you’ve gotten yourself into.”

She grinned at him mischievously. “It’s really not a problem, Mr. Miles. I’m so decent I can’t understand half of what he says.”

She laughed to herself the whole time Cord paid the bill and he and Miles carried the supplies to the wagon.

In the street, Cord muttered without looking at her, “Thought you’d be mad.”

“Why should I be mad? You just fixed it so there isn’t a woman

in town who'd have the nerve to say an unkind word to me."

"Mm. Anything else you want around here?"

"If it's all right, the druggist has some nice lotion at his shop, and I wouldn't mind some soap easier on my skin than what you use."

Amiably they headed to the druggist's.

On the wagon seat again, Cord asked, "You want to go straight home, or shall we press our luck at the cafe? I'd sure like a steak."

Anne was feeling almost giddy with the success of the day so far. "Let's try the cafe. All that can happen is Dora won't wait on us, and we'll sit a while and walk out."

He drove up the street.

Anne started to believe her worst that could happen prediction was going to come true. The cafe's owner, cook, and waitress, Dora Bagley, acted as if they weren't there. Dora was stout, red-faced, and formidable, and trying to force her to feed them would probably get them poisoned.

They sat quietly for a few minutes before Cord reached for his hat, signaling to Anne he was ready to admit defeat and leave. Just then, however, Noah Reynolds walked into the little restaurant, argued vigorously with Dora, walked over, and sat down at their table.

"Do you mind company?"

Cord regarded Noah thoughtfully. "Nope, but if you're planning on eating anything, you won't get it done here."

Noah chuckled. "Dora's changed her mind. It wouldn't do to refuse the town's sheriff his piece of pie just because of the company he keeps."

Sure enough Dora came over, thumped down three coffee cups and filled them with strong looking brew. "I know you want pie, Noah. What about these two?"

Cord's eyes met Anne's for an instant, and she saw a what the hell glint. He said only, "Two steaks with everything."

Dora never looked at him but left with a swish of skirts.

Cord leaned back in the chair, looking so relaxed as to be boneless. "'Preciate that, Noah. We'll treat you to the pie."

Noah shrugged. "When I heard you were here, I thought I'd better tell you, those Double M Men all quit and moved on. Meeks and Samuels were in to see Doc. Meeks had a pretty good shoulder wound, and you hit Samuels in the side. They must have hurt for a while, but they weren't in much danger of dying. I suppose you were trying to kill them, weren't you?"

"Trying to gutshoot them, but I wasn't too steady at the time." The off-hand, casual way he said it made the statement more

chilling.

The sheriff's mouth tightened with disapproval. "Well, they didn't say where they were headed, in case you have any notion of going hunting."

Cord's only answer was a slight headshake.

Now Noah brought up a second reason for his visit. "Also, I'm here because I'm as curious as the rest of the town. I figured Frank and Eph would have had Anne in Chicago long ago. What are you two doing here like this?"

Cord just looked out the window, answering the question in his usual way. Anne said, "We decided to stay married."

Surprise showed in Noah's face. "Just like that."

"Not exactly just like that, but that's how it ended up."

Noah was struggling for words, at a loss. "But what about Frank and Ephraim?"

"Well, they came the day after you did, but they made me angry, so I sent them away."

Noah did not understand. "Sent them away?"

Cord rejoined the conversation. "Ran them out of the house with a rifle."

Noah couldn't have shown more astonishment if they'd said a mouse had killed a cat. "*You* ran *Frank Bennett* out of the house?"

Anne felt slightly embarrassed and knew it showed. "Well, he started yelling ugly things, and I lost my temper."

Noah slumped in his chair, looking back and forth between the two of them.

The food arrived, and there was no more conversation while Noah dawdled over his pie and Cord and Anne dug into the steaks. Cord's plate was already spotless when Anne put down her fork and said with regret, "I hate to waste, but I really can't eat any more of this.

Cord said, "No waste," and exchanged his empty plate for hers with a smooth sleight of hand. The urge to hug him redoubled. He had a dreadful foul mouth, what he had just done was terribly uncouth, and she liked him more than she had imagined possible.

The cafe door banged, and her brother Robert came storming in, a purposeful scowl on his face. Rob had the same soft brown hair as Anne, but bright blue eyes. At twenty-five his face was still soft and boyish with a spoiled, usually sullen looking mouth, a sign, his sister thought, of immaturity.

"Anne, it's all over town about your being here. Noah told us you'd gone to Chicago, and we haven't had a letter from Aunt Clara. What are you doing here with that man?"

The next person who referred to Cord as "that man" was going

to get an earful. “Well, I should think you know, Rob. Father wanted me married, so he saw that I was married, and here I am. Let me introduce you to my husband.”

Already primed, Rob let go of his temper immediately. “You’re not introducing me to him, and you know perfectly well you’re not really married to him. If you weren’t so pigheaded, you’d be filing charges against him. You’re coming home right now! I suppose you think you’re getting even with Father for a couple of little slaps you absolutely deserved. You know all you have to do is apologize. You’ve ruined yourself for living in Mason, but you can go to Aunt Clara’s. No one will know.”

“Hell will freeze over before I apologize to anyone or before I ever set foot in that house again. It’s not my home any more. I’m not going back today, I’m not going back tomorrow, I’m not going back in ten years, and I’m not going back to die.”

Rob grabbed Anne’s arm, and as she pulled away from him she saw Cord look up from the last of her steak, his pale eyes looking like glass shards reflecting the cold winter light. Noah set his coffee cup down hard, his eyes darting back and forth between Rob and Cord.

“If you’re going to act like this I won’t even talk to you. Go away, Rob.”

Almost beside himself, Rob shouted at her. “Maybe Father’s right about you! Maybe you are just a slu….”

He never finished the last word as Cord erupted from his chair, backhanding the other man so hard Rob fell backwards across another table. He barely landed before Cord had him by the front of his coat, pinning him to the table as he shook his head to clear it.

“How do you like that sample of the ‘little slaps’ your father gave your sister? Boy, you listen careful, because if you ever talk to my wife like that again, I’ll break your jaw in so many places you’ll never talk again.”

Anne sipped her coffee and gave Noah a hard look. Surely it was time for him to start sheriffing. Cord slammed Rob down on the table and returned to his chair. As Rob began to get up, still full of indignant righteousness, Noah got to his feet, went over and put an arm around his shoulders.

“Sheriff, you have to arrest that man.”

“For what? My wife’s been dead for three years, and if you called her names like that today, I’d shoot you.”

“She’s not really his wife. He can’t keep her out there like that.”

As Noah hustled Rob out of the cafe, Anne smiled apologetically at Cord. “I’m sorry. He’s not really mean, he’s just….”

Cord shrugged. “Maybe he’s been taking etiquette lessons from

my brothers."

She laughed out loud at that and saw the surprise on Noah's face as he came back to their table.

"I think I convinced him to head for home and leave you be," he said. "Anne, I'm surprised it didn't bother you to see him roughed up like that."

She just shook her head. "The sad thing is it probably didn't do a bit of good. The trouble with my brother is he thinks God himself should consult with Father before making a decision to be sure to get it right."

Halfway home, Anne gave in to the urge and threw her arms around Cord's neck, giving him a hard hug and a kiss that landed on the corner of his mouth.

"What was that for?"

His words were almost a growl, but she could see the smile in his eyes. It had surprised her to realize today that others couldn't read his eyes.

"I was really afraid I'd get stoned in the streets, you know. I think I even felt a little bit I might deserve it. You not only made me feel respectable, you made me feel *eminently* respectable."

They rode the rest of the way in silence, but it was a companionable silence.

* * *

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Chapter 11

CORD'S RIBS HAD TAKEN THE trip to town better than he had dared hope, so the next day he saddled the big brown gelding that had been his favorite mount for years and tried thirty minutes in the saddle. The ride wasn't a pleasure, but it was bearable. After almost six weeks of neglect, he would start checking the horses in the far pastures the next day.

Unhappiness was all over Anne as she watched him ride off, and Cord felt a decided twinge of regret himself. He'd gotten used to having her nearby as he worked every day. Still, when she broached her solution to the problem over lunch it took him by surprise.

"Would you teach me to ride?"

His head jerked up, and his immediate no was short and curt.

Her mouth and chin trembled, and she looked down at her plate quickly, swallowing hard. "I see."

He had reacted without considering. Years ago Frank had talked him into working with his sons on their riding. The whole thing lasted less than fifteen minutes, with the boys, who could already ride well enough to get by, insolent, contemptuous, and smart-mouthed. Cord ended it by walking away, and the subject had remained a sore one in the family ever since.

Anne was different, though, and he knew it. She had been an apt pupil with the guns, and was still practicing and improving. She was careful around the horses and good with all his stock. He would probably enjoy teaching her to ride, and now, seeing the eager look change to hurt and the bowed head, he felt as if he'd hit her.

He slunk out of the house, comforting himself with the thought that she would ask again. His experience with females was with his sister Marie, who when faced with a no would wheedle prettily until she got her own way, and with his sister Hannah, who would sulk and make everyone around her miserable until she got what she wanted. He would, he vowed, give in the minute she mentioned it again.

But the next time he saw her she gave no sign, and a week later she had still not brought it up. When she asked for a Christmas tree, he didn't make the same mistake - he went into the hills and cut one.

He left early the next morning, driving the yearlings they had been handling back out to pasture, returning with two-year-olds he would keep up and work with for the next few weeks, only to spot Ephraim's horse and buggy and Frank's saddle horse in the yard. He let the horses scatter, not even herding them through the last gate.

The trip to town had put everyone on notice of the situation out here, and there was no doubt in his mind that his brothers were here to talk Anne into leaving, or that she would probably go. When Frank Bennett was trying, he could charm almost any woman into anything, and he would be trying this time. Cord headed for the door, stiff with anger.

Frank, Eph, and Martha were all seated at the kitchen table, and Anne was piling cookies on a plate. Two large cartons were on the floor and dresses lay wrapped in a sheet across the back of the stuffed leather chair. Anne treated him to her usual bright smile of greeting.

"Hello, there. I told everybody you'd be back soon. Your brothers brought Martha with them to make sure I didn't shoot them."

Anne acted totally unaffected by his cold silence and went on in the same pleased voice, explaining that her mother, finally aware that Anne had stayed with Cord, had boxed up her things and prevailed upon Martha and Ephraim to deliver them.

"I'm sure she never mentioned it to my Father, but he'll never notice my things are gone anyway," Anne said.

"Too bad she didn't tell him and save everyone the bother. They can just take it all the hell back," he said, without looking at his brothers. "You don't need that stuff, and you're not keeping it."

Anne looked at the Bennetts. "If you'll excuse us a moment, my husband and I need to talk."

As she spoke, she headed for the bedroom, and Cord could do nothing but follow. He closed the door and leaned on it, waiting for temper, tears, or even a reminder of his earlier casual promise not to "boss her around."

What he heard was the cool voice of reason. "You're absolutely right. I don't need those things, but I *want* them, and I think I should have them."

He started to speak, but she shook her head. "No, please, hear me out first. Those things aren't some sort of gift from my family. I've done work for my father's shop at home without so much as a thank you since I was a little girl. Some of those things are gifts from friends and other relatives, and a lot are things Aunt Clara got for me when I lived with her, and I earned that in a way too. There's also the fact that according to Martha my mother is making herself sick over this, and if she feels she's done something for me this way it will make her feel better. I fault her for being too weak to stand up to Father, but Mother had nothing to do with hurting us.

"Still, if you don't want those things here, if every time you see something that came out of one of those boxes it's going to make

you feel a little bit angry, then I'd rather not have any of it. Please just think it over before you say is all, and if you really don't want me to keep any of it, we'll tell your brothers to take the boxes back out and not to bring in anything else, and I promise I'll never say another word on the subject ever."

Why did she always do something different than he expected? How did a man deal with a woman like this? He searched her face carefully, finding no anger, no resentment, and no entreaty. She just waited patiently for his answer. He thought of how mean he felt over the riding lessons and knew he couldn't face denying her again. It also occurred to him that Martha and his brothers were still going to do their best to take her away with them. He could at least fix it so they would have to carry the damn boxes twice.

"Tell them I'll help carry it in." He was out the front door before she was out of the bedroom.

Anne smiled sweetly at the Bennetts and said, "Cord's going to help you carry those things in. With three of you it should go fast, and we can have coffee and cookies after you're through."

She did not miss the astonished looks that passed between the two blond men and Martha, but turned her back to fix the coffee and heard Frank and Ephraim head out as Cord brought in another box.

"Just put it all there on the floor, and I'll sort things out later."

When the boxes and wrapped dresses were all in the house, Cord disappeared without a word, leaving her with Frank, Eph, and Martha at the kitchen table. Drat his hide, Anne thought, I bet he knows they're up to something, and he's leaving me to deal with it.

She chatted merrily away, hoping to distract them and have them leave after a pleasant visit, knowing it was probably not going to happen.

Anne had known Martha Bennett for many years to speak to and was drawn now towards the woman who had become her sister-in-law. The first word that came to mind to describe Martha was "kind." The dark blonde hair was more than half gray, and the short, once gently rounded figure was frankly plump. Martha's beauty was of the spirit, and it shone from warm hazel eyes.

As the men sat in glum silence, Martha helped Anne's attempts at ordinary conversation. "Where did you get the Christmas tree?"

"Cord got it somewhere in the hills. I just described what I wanted. Isn't it pretty? I only have a few store-bought decorations, but I've got popcorn for strings and I'm going to use iced cookies in Christmas shapes on it too. We can look at them until Christmas and then eat them for weeks."

With a sinking feeling, Anne noticed Frank Bennett marshaling

all his considerable golden charm, waiting only for a pause in the conversation.

"Anne, Eph and I both feel that how things have turned out for you is a good part our fault. If we hadn't flown off the handle that first day, we could have helped you then and gotten you out of here."

Her smile froze. "You did me a favor. I've been happier here than ever before in my life."

Frank was not put off. "He's my brother, and I can't pretend I don't have feelings for him, but he's also one of the coldest, meanest men I've ever come across and there's no use pretending otherwise. He's not capable of affection, and there doesn't seem to be much else that he's not capable of. You're a decent woman and you deserve a decent life. Let us help. We can see that you get anywhere you want to go and that you have what you need to live the way you're used to living until you get established, no matter how long that takes."

I am not going to shout and I am not going to go for the guns Anne thought. I am going to handle this in a reasonable, ladylike way. She concentrated on Frank, with an effort keeping her voice controlled and steady. "You don't seem to understand. I am *married* to your brother."

Frank started to interrupt, and her control wavered. "Shut up and *listen* to me," she hissed.

Forcing a normal voice again, she continued, "Whether you approve, and your opinion of him or of me is irrelevant. We're married and that's the end of it. And let me tell you that if you ever again try to talk me into leaving him, offer me money to leave him, or say another unkind word about him to me, it will be the last time you ever walk in this house. Today I met you at the door with a gun and put it aside because you're his family and it seems right to try to get along, but if you ever raise this subject again it will be the last time we speak."

Finished, she gave first Frank, then Ephraim, and finally Martha the full benefit of her most forceful look. "Understood?"

Ephraim said, "All right, if that's the way you want it, but don't forget that if you change your mind, all you have to do is say so. We'll always be willing to help any way we can."

There was little else to say, and they left quickly after that. Anne still felt like kicking things when Cord came back.

"They're gone, huh?"

"Yes, they're gone," she sniped, "and you deliberately left me alone with them didn't you? You knew they were going to start in on me about leaving you, and you just walked out! I suppose you

hoped I'd fall for their promises of castles in Spain if I'd only leave here. Then you could be free of me and alone again, couldn't you?"

"Seemed like you should be able to hear them out and decide without me sitting here."

"Decide? I decided the day I said, yes, we'd be married." Understanding dawned on her. "That's not how you feel is it? You think this is some kind of temporary arrangement, and I'll be skittering off to something else soon, don't you?"

His eyes flickered and answered before his words did. "I don't want you to go, Annie, but I don't see you spending your life here either."

Her name was so short no one had ever used a diminutive, but she liked it and found herself feeling appeased almost against her will. It was also hard not to notice that while he might be surprised she was still here, he was thoroughly pleased.

"Well, when we're both old and gray-haired and you're still waking up to the sight of me every morning, I'll remind you of how perceptive you were."

Cord decided he was glad after all that she never seemed to do what he expected.

* * *

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Chapter 12

THAT NIGHT CORD ASKED IF Frank had mentioned anything about beef.

"No, why ever would he?" Anne asked.

"We have a deal. I raise enough ham and bacon for the whole family, and Frank supplies the beef."

Anne had asked him about the pigs once when he was bedridden, but he hadn't told her much. They were anathema to most ranchers, but Cord rather liked them. Liked them enough to disappear every spring and fall when Frank came with men to do the butchering.

"So your dear brother just welshes on his part of the deal every time he's angry with you?"

"Something like that," he admitted grudgingly. "I'm tired of nothing but chicken and ham. I'll go see Riley tomorrow."

Riley had first worked for Cord's father when they were both young men. He still worked for Frank, although as age and rheumatism slowed him down, Frank continued to lighten his workload.

The next day, Cord tied Keeper in front of the small house where Riley lived before the sun was more than a promise. He hoped to catch the old man still warming himself at the stove on the cold winter morning. Sure enough, Riley answered the door, inviting Cord in with a gesture. Small, wiry, and weathered looking, with thin white hair and blue eyes faded from too many years squinting into the sun, Riley was the closest thing to a grandfather Cord had ever known. He had taught Cord to ride and shoot as a boy, and, unlike Frank and Ephraim, didn't always leap to the worst conclusion.

Riley sank back down in the chair closest to the stove, examining Cord closely. "Heard you finally met somebody tougher than you, boy."

Cord tipped his hat back a bit and admitted, "Their guns were tougher. And there were nine of them."

"Figured it had to be something like that. Wasn't too smart of you to let them corner you was it?"

"Nope. Had weeks in bed to contemplate how stupid it was."

"It was that bad?"

Cord wondered why he could talk to this old man so much more easily than to his brothers. "Should have died. Was meant to."

"Nobody here knows."

"Nope."

"You really hurt that woman?"

Cord met this old friend's eyes steadily. Riley was the first one to ask. "I'm not doing her any favor keeping her around, but I never hurt her."

"Who marked her like Frank and Eph saw?"

"Her father and one of the Double M hands."

"Boy, you ever think of just telling Frank that? You got any idea how he's feeling?"

Cord shrugged. "Hardly matters what happened. It matters he's so damned sure I did it - never even asked. Neither did Eph. How the hell you think I feel?"

Riley sighed. "You telling me to mind my own business?"

"Yeah, I guess I am."

"What did you come for then?"

"Beef."

"Ah, well, that's easy enough isn't it? Suppose I just resume deliveries, so to speak. Am I allowed to ride over and meet this woman?"

"Sure. You'll like her. More grit than most men."

Cord rode home with several thick steaks, feeling better about everything, only to be knocked off balance again.

Anne was sorting through the boxes little by little. Yesterday she had been jubilant after discovering one box had books in it. He would be extremely happy about it himself soon she told him, because her cookbook was in with the rest. There were all sorts of wonderful things she could make now but had been unable to remember exact recipes for.

As he walked in and put the meat package on the table, she held up a huge piece of brown cloth. "What do you think of this?"

"What is it?"

"Actually, it's men's suiting material. Aunt Clara bought it just before I left Chicago. She had some notion of having a very conservative traveling dress made for me of it. Look, there's lots of it because we got enough for skirts, you see."

He didn't see what it had to do with him, and waited warily to find out.

"What I'm getting at is I haven't been able to think of anything to give you for a Christmas present, and I thought if you'd let me, I'd see if I can make this into a suit. I've only ever worked on parts, of course, but it shouldn't be that hard. The thing is you'd have to put up with a few fittings, so it can't be a surprise, and I couldn't finish it by Christmas anyway, maybe just the trousers." She was looking at him almost shyly, expectation of a rude no written all over her face.

Christmas present! The words brought visions of oranges in the toes of red stockings, small wooden horses and soldiers, a saddle specially made for him at ten, and a bridle at eleven. He hadn't given or received anything remotely resembling a present since Marie had married and left. What would she come up with next? The look on her face made a no utterly impossible.

"Mm, well, I guess, if you want to, whatever."

Christmas present! What did a man give a woman for a Christmas present? He did his best to ignore it, but the thought lurked in the back of his mind for days. When he used to go to the main ranch for Christmas with the family what had happened? Surely somebody must have mentioned what Frank gave Judith or Eph gave Martha?

He was out in the pastures checking on the stock when the sight of one of the older mares gave him an idea. Maybe there was a way to solve two problems at once.

Cord never knew what happened to him that Christmas. If anybody had told him what Anne would be up to, he would have sworn he'd ride away and stay away for a week or two, but instead he found himself drawn out of the cold and into the house every chance he got.

Anne had bought a dozen candle holders and candles for the tree and a few shining, mirrored ornaments at Miles' store. She hung those on the tree first. Then came long chains of popcorn. When she pinched him for nibbling popcorn, he ate more.

She rolled out huge sheets of cookie dough, and having no cookie cutters, drew shapes in the dough and cut them with a knife. Anne was not artistic. Soon he was drawing horses, soldiers, snowmen, and old-fashioned cottages in the dough and cutting them out for her. When she smacked him with a wooden spoon for eating dough, he ate more.

Anne glazed the cookies with colored icings, and they soon festooned the tree.

On Christmas Eve, Cord found himself standing in front of the bedroom mirror in his new trousers and a shirt made mysteriously from something else that was in what Anne called her "Chicago dresses." His sister, Hannah, who had told him from boyhood never to wear a white shirt because it emphasized his darkness would have a fit, but his own eyes told him how much better than anything he'd ever owned these clothes looked.

Cord let Anne talk him into leaving the clothes on for dinner when he realized it meant she was also going to dress up. He looked at her in the dark red dress and wondered how such a woman had ever gotten into his life. She belonged with a king, or at least a

prince.

He was thinking the dress looked so good on her he wanted to rip it right off her when Foxface warned of company, and Eph and Martha drove into the yard. They were, of course, on their way to spend several days at the ranch for Christmas.

In minutes Anne had the tentative Martha and obviously reluctant Ephraim in the house, coats off. Cord watched cynically, figuring it served his brother right as he had to admire the tree, Cord's clothes, and was plied with choices of coffee, special spiced tea, or hot chocolate. The house was full of tantalizing smells of roasting beef and every special treat Anne could think of.

Martha finally relaxed and started to laugh. "I made Ephraim stop by thinking we might talk you into coming to the big house with us for Christmas dinner," she said, "but I see now that was foolish of me."

She turned to Cord then, studying him as if she had not seen him for a long time. "You know, dear, you really do look nice tonight. I'd say this suit is going to be a very successful Christmas present."

"Thanks, Marty."

Ephraim said almost nothing and looked relieved as he and Martha left in a flurry of the women's chatter and Merry Christmas wishes at each other.

Dinner was so good he wanted to just stay at the table and think about it, but Anne had another surprise in store. She took his father's old Bible from its place on the shelf and sat on the settee.

"Let's sit here for once," she said.

Unsure what she was up to now, Cord joined her warily. She began to read the Christmas story from Chapter 2 of Luke. An easy contentment enveloped him, and he listened not to the words, but to the light pleasant sound of her voice.

When she handed him the Bible and said, "You do the rest," he almost refused. One glance at her serenely happy face made that impossible; he began to read. Afterwards, they lit the candles on the tree, blew out the lamps, and watched the candles burning in the darkness.

She sighed softly, "They're so beautiful."

He could smell the slightly spicy scent of her. "Mm." He wondered what would happen if he just put an arm around her here and now and tried holding her. If she made a face in the darkness, he'd never know.

What happened was she nestled in the curve of his arm, head on his shoulder and whispered, "This is the nicest Christmas I've ever had."

It sure as hell was.

Christmas Day dawned cloudy and cold with an occasional snow crystal flying through the air. Cord could not talk Anne into staying in, and so it seemed as good a time as any to try to tell her when she saw the mare named Lady now in a stall.

"That mare wasn't here yesterday. Why is she in? Is she sick?"

"She's one of the horses I brought up from New Mexico. She never was much good as a broodmare, but she's pretty well broke."

"But why is she in?"

"Well, I thought…." Why was this so hard? "I thought if you still wanted to learn to ride, you could use her to learn on."

She spun from the horse to him, solemn and wide eyed. "Are you saying you'll teach me to ride as a Christmas present?"

He was probably going to get spit in the eye over this, and worse yet he probably deserved it. "Yeah, guess I am."

If she never learned to sit on the damned horse it would be worth it just to get hugged and kissed the way he did that Christmas morning.

THE VISIT TO CORD'S ACTUALLY caused quarreling at the main Bennett Ranch. Martha could not get over how much different Cord looked than ever before - less hard, still lean, but not so drawn and gaunt. The clothes helped, of course. The dark brown trousers and shirt that was actually not true white but a pale cream enhanced his bronze skin, but clothes couldn't change those cold eyes to a warm gold.

Martha had married Ephraim before Cord was born. Her many memories included the bereft five-year-old boy she had held and tried to comfort when he first began to accept his mother was not gone just for a while but forever. Having loved and mothered the boy, it was impossible for Martha to believe the worst of the man, although she seldom argued with Ephraim or Frank. The evidence was all on their side.

Tonight Martha couldn't let it go. "We've got something wrong about them."

"What do you mean?" Ephraim asked her.

"That woman's no more afraid of him than I am of you. The first time we visited I expected a cowering creature I'd feel sorry for, and instead I felt we were all outmatched. Why is she insisting they're married? Did you see the rings?"

"I understand what you're saying, but I can't believe he's really dragged her off to a preacher. More likely he decided to brand her, and no matter what it seems like, she's sitting there playing wife to a man who sure hurt her."

“He called me Marty.”

No one but Martha saw anything in that.

“He used to call you that all the time.”

”*Used to.* Years ago before everything went sour. Things just aren’t the way we all thought. They look happy, both of them. She’s not afraid of him.”

Frank said, “I’m not afraid of him most of the time, just when he starts going over the edge.”

“We’ve been wrong. You are wrong. If you could have seen him tonight…. I kept thinking there’d be as many women run towards him as away if they could see him like that.”

Frank’s answer to that was a derisive snort.

Ephraim had been against the visit to Cord’s in the first place and was argumentative now. “The reason he looked so good was that poor silly woman is making him a suit that would cost a pretty penny right out of her father’s shop, and what do you think she’s going to get from our little brother in return? More grief, that’s what. He shames me.”

Martha said, “If he’d done what everyone says, she’d be afraid, and she’s not. She’s not the kind of woman to live with a man in terror anyway. And he looks different, more relaxed.”

Frank’s voice rose in exasperation. “I hate to be crude, but of course he’s more relaxed. He’s got the woman, doesn’t he? And there’s nothing for her to be afraid of as long as she gives him what he wants.”

Bluntness had no effect on Martha. She’d been a Bennett too long for that. “If you’d rather let this thing fester like an infected wound I can’t stop you, but you’re wrong. I don’t know what the explanation can be, but I know there is one. Whatever else he is or isn’t, he wouldn’t hurt a woman like that.”

No one budged an inch on their position, and so Martha changed the subject rather than continue the argument.

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Chapter 13

CORD HAD THOUGHT THAT ONCE winter weather made work outside even harder, Anne would be content to stay inside. He was wrong. Yes, there were days when snow came down so hard they both did minimal chores and stayed in the house. On those days, Anne read the few of his father's books she had not seen before, and Cord tried some of her books that were not poetry. Mostly they both just bundled up and worked outside.

He had also thought spending half an hour a day teaching her to ride would make it harder to finish work that had to be done. In fact, the help she provided with feeding and milking morning and night, in loading the hay wagon and taking winter feed to the pastured herds meant everything got done more quickly.

Her riding lessons expanded to an hour or more, and he taught her not just to sit on a horse, but horsemanship. She absorbed knowledge eagerly, and as she learned applied her new skills to helping even more. He would finish riding one young horse to find the next one waiting, groomed, and ready to saddle.

Not only was she good help, but hard, tedious work began to be fun. Anne approached everything with zest, finding humor and beauty in the most ordinary things.

When the ground was covered with snow, they had to haul hay to the pastured horses by sleigh. One day he found the team harness hung with bells. Anne had gotten Riley to bring her an unused set of sleigh bells from the main ranch. The pastured herds began to come at a run when they heard the sound of the approaching sleigh, bells jingling merrily. Or maybe, he thought, it was the sound of her laughter that brought them.

Other things didn't change. He touched her only in the darkness of the nights, as gently as possible. He dreaded ever seeing distaste or even resignation in the big gray eyes. It didn't occur to him that a woman who slept curled against him and used every excuse to throw her arms around his neck and kiss any part of his face she could reach did not find his physical demands burdensome.

A growing curiosity began to gnaw at Cord. He wanted to know more about his wife - what her life had been like before, what she thought and felt about things, and most particularly about the Chicago fiance that had not even had the good sense to seduce her.

She murmured and whispered endlessly to the animals. When Riley brought beef, the two of them would in no time be deeply immersed in conversation. He had seen her outgoing chatter with Martha at Christmas. It seemed that Anne talked to everyone and

everything but him.

That was not really fair, he admitted to himself. She talked to him precisely as much as he talked to her, factual, necessary speech that enabled them to get the day's work done.

The experience with the story of Lathrum's colt had taught Cord that he could find out anything he wanted to know, but to get what he wanted he would have to give what he didn't want to give. So he struggled against his own curiosity for weeks before losing the battle one night in the darkness, her cheek as always against his shoulder.

"Tell me about that Richard in Chicago."

Anne stretched a little and put her head on the pillow level with his, leaving her fingers curled around his arm. "What do you want to know?"

"What was wrong with him."

"I told you there was nothing wrong with him."

"There had to be. Tell me about him."

And so she told him about Richard. The next night she asked him about where he had been and what he had done in the five years he had been gone from Mason. Somehow it wasn't as hard as he'd thought it would be, feeling her close beside him in the night, to tell her things he had never told anyone before.

So as the nights passed, they found out about each other. Eventually the talk began to include the work they had done that day, what they would do tomorrow, and even what would happen on the ranch in the spring and summer.

He must be out of his mind, Cord thought, for she would be gone soon, leaving the nights as empty as the days. But then maybe she would stay at least through the spring, maybe even through the summer. Maybe.

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Chapter 14

"SOMETIMES I USED TO WONDER if I was just born into the wrong family," Anne told Cord, her voice soft in the night. "There'd be months and months when everything was all right, and then something would happen like that time at school with you and Marie, and everyone, not just my own family, but everyone, would be telling me what a disgrace I was. How could they all be wrong? But in my heart I thought they were wrong, and Mother was always saying, 'Don't tell your father,' or 'We can't let your father find out,' so I knew she didn't think I was wrong so much as she wanted to keep peace."

"She's afraid of your father," Cord said.

"Oh, no. Well, I never thought so. She's just better than I am at doing what she's supposed to. Father's always been very strict. I think he was happiest when he was in the Army, but he was badly wounded in '64 and sent home. Mother says he didn't like returning to civilian life and that's why we moved out here, to start over."

Cord listened without comment to Anne's description of a childhood filled with family secrets and hypocrisies. From the time Edward Wells had opened his tailor's shop, Leona helped at home when there were rush orders or too much work at once. Her work saved hiring a helper who would not always be busy, for money was a problem until Leona came into her inheritance when Anne was fifteen.

By the time Anne was five, she was sewing buttons on men's clothing, getting her small hands rapped with a ruler if the work was below Wells' exacting standards. At ten she went without dessert for a week when she pricked her finger with a needle and ruined the front of a fancy shirt with her blood. Nothing could have forced an admission from Edward Wells that his wife or daughter did any such work at all.

Anne also described some good times. She always loved school. In James Miles' household she had seen a warm, loving family environment. She and Rachel Miles had been best friends from the first day they met, and they shared girlish games and confidences even after Rachel married.

When the Wells family first lived in Mason, Anne's mother had a horse named Mollie and a buggy and made deliveries for the shop, sometimes visiting her friend Maudie Winter outside of town. While his women folks' helping his business by sewing at home was Edward Wells' deep and closely guarded secret, Leona's making deliveries was not. Anne and her mother had grand times right up

until the old mare died. Two unsuccessful attempts to replace the horse had disgusted Edward, and he refused to hear of it again, depriving both Leona and Anne of a treasured recreation.

"I suppose I just had occasional lapses that scandalized everyone until I started seeing Elroy Turrell," Anne said. "After that there was probably never a day Father wasn't unhappy with me until he sent me to Chicago. He didn't think Elroy was good enough. He didn't think the Turrells were good enough."

"He got that right anyway," Cord muttered.

"Do you want to hear this or not?" Anne said tartly. "Do you know Elroy?"

"Seen him around, but don't know him," Cord said. "Seems kind of spineless to me."

"He is not!" Anne said. "He's - sweet-natured, kind."

Cord, who didn't consider sweet nature a primary virtue in a man, just grunted.

Listening to Anne go on about the Turrells, people Edward Wells looked down on as unmannered and beneath him, Cord realized the friendly farm family had appealed to Anne as much as Elroy himself. She had liked their outgoing ways and even thought being a farmer's wife would be far more interesting than town life filled with ladies' teas and church sewing circles.

"I'm not sure Elroy felt strongly enough about me to risk Father's disapproval and really come courting," Anne admitted. "When I told him Father was sending me to Chicago, all he said was, 'Maybe it's for the best.' He married someone else that same year."

"Hurt?" Cord asked.

"No," Anne said slowly. "Not the way you mean. I guess it hurt that he didn't care more, but I didn't either, really. I wanted a different life, but I didn't want to go to Chicago."

Anne's Aunt Clara was Edward Wells' sister, and from Anne's description Cord formed a picture of a woman every bit as rigid and self-serving as Edward himself. Clara Wainwright was the childless widow of a federal judge. Like her brother, she had brightened her own future through a careful marriage and was now a woman of considerable influence in her own right. For Anne, life in Chicago had been far worse than life in Mason.

"There was nothing to *do*," Anne told him. "She has servants to do everything. There were all these silly teas and lunches and dinners where you just talked about *nothing* for hours. I was afraid I'd lose my mind and start screaming right in the middle of some formal dinner.

"I think Aunt Clara finally realized how terrible it was for me because when I first asked about going back to school she wouldn't

hear of it, but in the end she did let me go. The University of Illinois allows women now, you know. She actually let me go, let me attend some classes there, and that's where I met Richard Tyler."

Cord listened intently to this part of Anne's story, the part he most wanted to hear.

The son of a prominent Chicago banker, Richard was guaranteed a position in the bank when he finished school. Anne's description made Richard sound like a better looking, more educated version of Elroy Turrell.

He was, she admitted, like her own family in that he cared very much what other people thought, but he told her he respected her quick mind and independent ways. With the university courses giving her something with which to occupy her mind, and Richard providing an agreeable escort to dances, dinners, and other social events on weekends, life began to be quite pleasant.

"He asked me to marry him only months after we first started seeing each other. I was sure it would be a good life. Aunt Clara approved, and the whole family was delighted. We knew we couldn't marry until Richard finished school and established himself at the bank, but we were willing to wait."

Did she sound wistful, Cord wondered.

"Right from the beginning we had minor differences," Anne continued, "but everyone does, don't they? And I knew it was my fault. It was always the same kind of problem I had with my own family."

"Like what?" Cord asked.

"Well, like the dress," Anne whispered. "You said you liked it, but it was only here where no one saw me, except Ephraim and Martha, but we didn't know they were going to stop by."

"What are you talking about?"

"Christmas. The red dress I wore Christmas."

"Yeah, I remember. It's pretty."

"I had it made for a special occasion in Chicago, and Richard made me take it off."

"I thought he was a gentleman," Cord said.

Anne pinched his arm. "You know what I mean. He made me go back and change it - for this drab gray one that Aunt Clara picked for me - he said that red was too bold a color."

"Sounds like you had another little gray man there. Surprised you and Pratt never got to courting," Cord said.

"He wasn't like Yellow-Belly Pratt," Anne snapped. "He wasn't gray and he wasn't little!" Then she said more slowly, "I was used to it then. To always being the one who was wrong, the cause of all the trouble."

Cord ignored her lukewarm defense of her old beau. “So he was gray and gutless and he never touched you.”

“He touched me. We kissed and we held hands sometimes. It was proper. Do you think I should have been with him in that way?”

“Hell, no. He’s probably not capable.”

“He’s married now. They have children.”

“Must be Catholic.”

“What makes you say that?”

“Virgin births.”

“Do you want to hear this, or do you want to make belittling remarks?”

“Talk.”

So Anne told him about the quarrel that ended it forever with Richard Tyler. They had attended a small dinner party of school friends, among them a friend of Richard’s Anne particularly disliked. Daniel drank to excess. Sober he was rude. Drunk he was ugly. He had cornered Anne alone once and forced a disgusting, liquor-laden kiss on her.

Only mildly tipsy that night, Daniel started lecturing everyone on one subject after another. He pompously quoted one of the great philosophers, except he attributed the quotation to the wrong man. Unable to resist a small revenge, Anne tartly pointed out the mistake. The whole company had a huge laugh at Daniel’s expense, but Richard saw nothing even vaguely humorous in the incident. She listened to a diatribe all the way home.

“He said maybe educating women was a mistake after all. He didn’t even care when I told him I did it because Daniel forced that kiss on me. He didn’t care! He said I had to promise never to contradict any of his men friends again. Ever. We had a terrible argument.”

“So that was the end?” Cord asked.

“No. Maybe. Maybe it was already the end, but he went to Aunt Clara, and she said I couldn’t go back to the university until I apologized and gave Richard his promise. It was sneaky and conniving and - and a betrayal. That’s what made me break the engagement. I wrote him a letter. Aunt Clara was furious and of course when Father found out he was worse - beyond fury.”

Edward Wells took the first train to Chicago but was unable to repair the damage. He might have been able to coerce Anne into relenting, but Richard was as unwilling to resume the engagement as Anne, and Edward had no leverage over Richard Tyler.

White with rage, Edward brought his daughter home in disgrace, not speaking a single word to her from Chicago to Mason. The next year was absolute hell.

“He raged at me over every meal and every other time he saw me. He finally wore down, but he never really got over it. After that everyone just accepted that I was a spinster because I was - difficult - and that was that. Until George Detrick started the trouble all over.”

Cord listened to Anne’s story with wonder. He had always assumed that women like Anne Wells lived charmed lives, cherished, treasured, and protected by loving families, enjoying their lives of leisure and ease. He had watched her explore her own strengths and courage in those first weeks here with him and thought of her as having escaped a cage, but he had thought it was a comfortable, gilded cage, not a true prison.

He finally began to understand that a woman of this much strength and spirit might find the life she had led restrictive and boring. He was not ready to accept that his own life suited her perfectly.

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Chapter 15

ANNE WAS FILLED WITH ENVY as Cord described a childhood as different from hers as night from day.

The Bennett clan was a fun-loving, rowdy lot. He barely remembered his mother, and for the years Cord knew him his father was a vague shell of a man. Frank and Ephraim, so much older, had together acted as father, and his sister Hannah and Martha had divided the role of mother. Cord and his sister Marie were inseparable as children. Ephraim's oldest children were the same age as their half-Indian cousins, and so in those days there were usually half a dozen young Bennetts tumbling all over the ranch.

The summers were filled with swimming in the creeks, horseback riding, games, and roughhousing. Winters there were sleigh rides, snow forts, snowball fights, and other sorts of good times. They all worked too, of course. The family worked as hard as it played, but it was all part of the whole.

"After that trouble at school, the whole family just set themselves to teaching us at home," Cord said. "It was probably a better education. Eph and Frank both went to college back East. Eph stuck it out and got the degree, and Frank did two years, even though he hated it."

The few ugly episodes of prejudice that occurred during those early years failed to make a lasting impression on either Cord or Marie. The Bennett family kept the children in their midst, protecting them too well until what the whole family came to call "the Hatch business."

Cord's voice stopped in the darkness, and Anne waited long enough to wonder if he'd fallen asleep before prompting him. "So what happened? Why did you attack him?"

"I tried to kill him. If no one had gotten there for another couple of minutes, I would have."

Marie was thirteen and Cord fifteen that night. She had begged and wheedled until the family agreed to let them come along to a social in town. Marie was wildly excited, by the dance, by her new grown up dress, and by everything to do with the outing.

Cord was not particularly impressed by the confining clothes but was mildly interested in events and pleased with his sister's happy bubbling. The two of them were instructed to sit at the side out of the way. Watching the women in their best finery satisfied Marie for a while, but soon she wanted to be somewhere else.

"If we were on the other side we could hear the music better and see the ladies' dresses up close from near the punch bowl."

“Walk across that floor, and we’ll be back at Eph’s house in five minutes and you know it. You can see from here.” Cord had no urge to see anyone’s dress better.

“We wouldn’t have to walk across the floor. We could go out the door right here and come in on the other side. They’d never notice.”

“Don’t blame me when you’re getting tucked into bed early. I’m staying here.”

“Coward.”

Name calling wouldn’t move him, and Marie knew it, but she always gave it a try. She was only gone a short while before he decided that her chattering company was better than none and followed her. Unable to find his sister, Cord started searching the surrounding area with increasing concern, unwilling to go to Frank or Ephraim and call attention to their disobedience.

“I found her because of the sound. It didn’t sound like her, it was like a kitten mewling, but somehow I knew it was her and it was bad. The moon was bright enough when I got close I could see her - and him.”

Marie was sprawled semi-conscious near a group of low bushes, her beloved new dress torn to the waist, skirts pushed up and underclothes ripped off. Jack Hatch, the worst of the town’s bullies, knelt between her parted thighs, engorged organ jutting obscenely in the moonlight, just starting to lower himself over the thirteen-year-old girl.

“When people talk about seeing red you think it’s just a way to say angry, but it’s not, it really happens like that,” Cord said. “I can’t even remember parts of it. I was in that jail cell before things started seeming real again. The rest is red-colored and I’m not sure what really happened and what only happened inside my head.”

Sounds of the fight attracted attention, and it was Noah Reynolds who choked Cord off Jack Hatch, but not before Jack lost consciousness and stopped breathing. Patrick Andrews, the town’s doctor at the time, was able to thump on Jack enough to get his heart and lungs going again, but he had been as close to dead as a man can get and come back. At fifteen, Cord ended up in jail, charged with attempted murder.

“That’s when all this devil talk started. They couldn’t believe I had Hatch down like that because he was so much bigger. Fact is I got a hell of a jump on him because he was busy with Marie, and Eph and Frank always used to make me mind by grabbing me by the scruff of the neck or whatever was handy. They never thought about how they were teaching me to deal with them. Wasn’t too long after that before Frank and Eph had to get together to do much with me.

When I got to full size the both of them couldn't win a fight with me. Eph's too civilized.

"I was in jail ten days while the family went half-crazy trying to make sure there was no trial because they knew the town would be happy to throw their half-breed bastard in jail for life. Pa sold cattle for half what he should have got. Eph and Martha mortgaged their house. Frank and Judith gave up everything they'd saved. Hannah's husband was already drinking pretty bad, but they came up with some cash too somehow. They paid the Hatches off. So those sons of bitches left town with more money than they'd ever dreamed about because Jack almost raped Marie."

"I never heard about any of that," Anne said. "Why wasn't he charged for attacking a little girl?"

"Because she was Indian, and Indians don't count. She was never the same after that. You remember how she looks?"

"Oh, yes, she's beautiful," Anne said.

"Beautiful and with light skin," Cord said. "So she made up her mind she was going to get far enough away no one would know about her and she was going to be white. And that's what she did."

"Was that part of the reason she married that Denver man?" Anne asked.

"Howlett. Paul Howlett. That was the only reason. She barely knew him and he was twice her age. Nothing was ever the same," Cord said bitterly. "Marie wasn't the same. The family wasn't the same. They almost bankrupted themselves over it. Pa died before they recovered financially. And I wasn't the same either."

"Because you almost killed a man?" Anne whispered.

"No, because while I was in his jail Noah told me things my family should have long before that, about what it means to be half-Indian in a white man's world. I guess Marie figured it out for herself in one way. Some of it I knew really, but the way he put it, put it all together - they should have told us both from the time we were little. I know why they didn't, but they should have."

"They loved you."

"They still should have told us."

From that time, Cord felt more and more a stranger in his own family. Marie was no longer the sister who had been his best friend. Martha and Eph were living in town.

Frank's wife, Judith, had always been a little uneasy around her husband's half-brother, and now Judith's fear blossomed into hysteria. She was afraid to be alone with him. She didn't like him around her children. While the boys were bad enough, when the fourth and last child, born when Cord was seventeen, was a girl, Judith's fear became uncontrollable. He was not allowed near the

baby, never touched her, never held her.

At eighteen, heartsick and unable to endure any more, he started fixing up the buildings here on the original part of the ranch and moved off by himself.

A year later, Marie realized her ambition of making a new life. Cord tried to talk her out of marrying Howlett from the day of her engagement until the day of her wedding.

"Is she happy?" Anne asked.

"Don't know. Haven't seen her since she left. Frank and Eph visit her sometimes, but I'd give her story the lie, wouldn't I?"

"You mean she doesn't want to see you? Do you write?"

"Nope. She wouldn't even speak to me at the end. What I know is what I hear from Martha mostly. She raised Howlett's children from a first marriage. Never had any of her own. That could give her away too if she had a baby that looked like her own mother - or me."

Marie was gone. The last of the barns and outbuildings on this part of the ranch and every piece of equipment that had been stored in them were repaired, and Cord was beginning to feel restless anyway, when a man he barely knew stopped him on the street in Mason one day.

"Hear tell they're trying Jack Hatch for murder in Salt Lake City next week. They even got a witness. You going to go see him hang?"

Suddenly it seemed like attending the hanging would be the thing to do, seeing the end to something that had done so much damage to him and to his family.

Cord left Frank a note saying only that he was going away, packed, and left. After Salt Lake, there was no reason to head home, and he kept moving west, into Nevada, Oregon, then south through California, across Arizona and New Mexico Territories and into Texas.

In the border country of Texas he found a whole people of mixed blood, people who accepted him as easily as they did most other things in their lives. He worked for good wages breaking horses for one of the big ranches in the area and settled in, even living for almost a year with a round, brown, laughing woman named Rosa.

"Was she beautiful?" Anne asked.

"No. Pretty maybe. Maybe not even that, maybe just - happy, full of laughter."

Cord spoke only a few words of Spanish, and Rosa spoke no English. They lived together without really knowing each other. He gave her extra cash every month in addition to paying all their bills.

When he found she was not spending the money on herself but

giving it to family, she expected him to be angry. He wasn't. He just gave her twice as much. Her whole family lived well.

"Did you - care about her?" Anne asked.

"Sure. Not the way Frank cares about Judith, if that's what you're asking," Cord said. "We spent the nights in the same bed, but what she cared about was her family, and I was gone all day working horses."

Things drifted along thoughtlessly in this fashion for months, and then Rosa was pregnant.

Suddenly Cord felt trapped. He knew with no shadow of a doubt he did not want to spend the rest of his life in the border country. The people were friendly, but they had different ways, different food, different beliefs and language. He began to hate the dry, flat country with its searing heat, snakes and lizards. With a sudden ache he knew he had always intended to return to Colorado and to the Bennett clan.

When Rosa miscarried, he felt sad, sympathetic - and undeniably, guiltily, free. He never touched her again. As soon as he was sure she was well, he left her with most of his savings from the riding job and started north for Colorado.

Almost five years after leaving, Cord arrived home riding the big brown gelding he called Keeper, stringing along ten head of horses he meant to start a breeding herd with.

He left home at nineteen, a lean, quiet boy, good enough with a gun to merit respect, too good with a knife and his fists, and better than most with a horse. Returning at twenty-four, he was leaner, quieter, and had strange new skills with fists, knives, and horses that reinforced gossip about him having the devil in him.

Bone-weary and exhausted from the long ride up from New Mexico with so many horses, he slept most of his first day home. On the second day, just when he was thinking of riding over to the main ranch, Frank rode up, alerted by the smoke from the chimney of the old house.

Cord left thinking his family would not miss him particularly, would probably be better off without him around. He was wrong. For five years not a day went by that Frank and Ephraim didn't wonder where their half-brother was, worry about how he was, and fear for him. Frank rode into the yard and saw Cord standing there with hair down past his shoulders, wearing knee-high Apache moccasins, and five years of fear and worry turned instantly to rage. For once Frank was too angry even to raise his voice.

He looked Cord over and snarled, "So you just rode off and went Injun, you son of a bitch," then wheeled his horse and left.

In the years since, the relationship between the brothers had

often been worse, occasionally a little better, but never good. Frank and Ephraim never forgave Cord for the years of fear and worry, and Cord resented their attitude and would neither apologize nor explain. The remaining love and loyalty were not enough to bridge the deep chasm of estrangement among the brothers.

Of course, Cord told Anne only the facts. The emotions she surmised for herself, and she began to understand the combination of opposing forces that had produced this man who was on the one hand so silent, hard, and cold, and on the other so gentle, kind, and compassionate. Since they had first crossed paths as children, she had always instinctively liked him. What she was learning only proved how right she had been. She liked Cord Bennett, and she liked being his wife.

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Chapter 16

ANNE SLIPPED AS SOUNDLESSLY AS possible from bed in the middle of the night, careful not to wake Cord. Her body had given the familiar signs earlier in the day, and she was already wearing the straps that held the rags which would soon be needed to absorb her monthly flow.

Finding her slippers in the dark and wrapping her robe tightly around her, she felt her way to the rocker in the parlor. The rhythmic, miserable cramping in her lower abdomen had awakened her, and she knew she could not be still in the bed but would need to move with the pain. She curled in the chair, rocking slowly, both hands pressed to her stomach. The pain, her own fatigue, and the unnatural lateness of the hour combined to give the night an unreal quality.

She had no idea how long she had been there, quietly rocking, when she heard Cord's voice. "Annie?"

"I'm sorry. I tried not to wake you."

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing. I just have a few cramps is all. Go back to bed. It's all right."

"What kind of cramps?"

She could hear the concern in his voice and smiled. Propriety was about to lose again.

"My monthly flow is starting, and I always have a few cramps for a couple of hours. When it happens in the day it doesn't matter, I just keep moving around, but at night it's a bother. I can't be still in the bed you see. I didn't want to wake you."

She heard him moving away, then a match flared as he lit the kitchen lamp. He was naked in the light, and she watched him through a dreamy haze as he began to move around the kitchen.

The modesty she had been raised with dictated not only that she try to keep her own body covered at all times but that she avert her eyes from her husband. The big stove kept the kitchen and parlor very warm but left the bedrooms chilly this time of year. Even so, there were times he would simply stretch from the bed, walk across the room unclothed, or unself-consciously dress or undress before her.

Anne had taken enough guilty peeks to know how different his recovered body was from the ravaged mess she had nursed months ago, but she had never had the courage to really study him.

Tonight nothing seemed real, and she watched him through half-closed, sleepy eyes. Anne had caught glimpses of her brother

without a shirt, and there were strong men at the county fair who wore thin tight shirts that displayed their muscles, but Cord was very different from both her brother's smooth softness and the strong men's thick bulging bodies.

A memory from Chicago drifted through her mind. She had visited the Lincoln Park Zoo there with Richard and other friends. They had all agreed that the big cats were the highlight of their visit - lions, tigers, cougars. Some were restless, resentful of the cages and imprisonment and paced continuously, smooth muscles rippling under gleaming, short fur. Anne was drawn back again and again. The big cats looked dangerous and undeniably beautiful.

Now she stared at her husband in wonder. Those cats were kept in cages so that people could see and admire them because they were beautiful, and Cord was beautiful. He was really no darker than many heavily tanned ranchers and farmers. Of course, their bodies would be white where the sun never touched, and Cord was an even copper hue all over. Bronze skin slipped smoothly across his muscle. The gaunt look of months ago was gone, but there was no excess flesh and his spine, ribs, and hips were faintly outlined under his skin. The breadth of his shoulders tapered gracefully to the flat belly, narrow waist and hips. Anne knew well the smooth texture of the skin of his chest, which was free of the mat of curling hair her brother had.

How can it be a sin to admire something so marvelous she thought? Surely it cannot be wrong for a woman to look like this at her own husband. She was still staring, entranced, when he came back across the room to her, carrying a cup, and crouched down beside her.

"Here drink this."

She managed to tear her gaze away from the neat line of hair that ran like a seam from just below his navel to where it widened where his legs joined his body. She didn't feel awake enough to be embarrassed.

"What is it?"

"Herbal tea that's good for some kinds of pain. My mother used to make it, and Martha still does. Might not help, but it won't hurt."

She sipped the hot liquid, which was bitter, but not unpleasant. "I always meant to ask you about some of the strange things in the little tins on the shelves. Why didn't you tell me about it when you were hurt?"

"It's not that strong. Come on back to bed. You don't have to worry about waking me now."

She obediently headed back to the bed. He blew out the lamp and curled around her. "Do you have your hands on your stomach

because the pressure helps?"

"I don't know really. Not so much pressure as the warmth, I think."

Both his hands covered hers, and she nestled back against him gratefully, already feeling less pain and more drowsiness. Either the tea was working or it was time for the cramping to stop.

Just before she dropped off to sleep one thought momentarily roused her. Cord had to her enormous relief weeks ago given up trying to look at her unclothed form. Anne had never understood what seemed to her to be a perverse desire to observe her nude.

Could it be that he wanted to watch her the way she had wanted to watch him tonight? Was it possible that he simply found pleasure in looking at her? Shyness made her unable to deliberately show herself to him, but after that night she stopped trying so hard to hide.

* * *

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Chapter 17

CORD WAS LOATHE TO ADMIT it, but by late winter all their problems had narrowed down to money, or the lack of it. After that first trip to town they were always careful to purchase only necessary supplies, but even so his small supply of cash was down to a few dollars. Adding in Anne's Grenerton money, something he was dead set against doing, would only put off the inevitable for a few more weeks. He found himself almost as against asking Frank for a loan as Anne was. It had never bothered him before.

He accepted that Frank and Ephraim alone had inherited the Bennett Ranch. His father had written his will that way to protect against losing land to either of the girls' husbands or because of Cord's and Marie's Indian blood.

It was understood in the family, though, that the ranch belonged to them all. Ranch profits supported Ephraim and Martha in the early years before Eph's law practice began to pay, and when Hannah's husband turned increasingly to drink, ranch money kept her and her children. Marie, of course, walked away, and Cord felt that by running horses on part of the land, he had his share. Even so, Frank would have given extra money outright. Cord was the one who had always insisted on taking only loans and repaying them.

Ephraim's older children had all gone East to school, married and stayed, but Pete, the youngest son, wanted to ranch. Frank's oldest son also wanted no life but that of a cattleman, and the family knew that someday Pete and Luke would run the ranch as Frank did now. Frank's two younger sons, Gil and Martin, were not drawn to the land, and his daughter, Beth, would surely marry and leave with a husband, although the ranch would always be there for any of them if needed.

Still, Cord could not bring himself to see Frank about money this year. There were alternatives, of course, none pleasant, but one must be chosen. He could round up a bunch of broke horses that met the Army's specifications and sell them for cavalry mounts, but he hated the thought of unskilled raw recruits climbing on his horses.

He could sell Sailor, the stallion now running with his broodmares, to a Denver man who had wanted the horse for years, but Lathrum's colt would not be old enough to service mares this spring or next. They could sell one of the cows or a couple of the pigs, but it wouldn't bring enough to help for long, and although he didn't tell Anne, Cord half expected that with the way the people of Mason felt about their marriage, much less the way they believed it

came about, he might not sell any horses at all this year.

In early March Cord returned from a long, solitary ride across the ranch to calm a silly four-year-old to find Anne almost dancing in the yard. As he unsaddled his horse, it took him a while to decipher the jumbled, excited story. Anne was sure the financial dilemma was as good as solved.

"Guess what, guess what? About half an hour after you left I had a visitor. His name is Adamson, Mr. Henry Adamson from Lincoln, Nebraska. He's here on other business, but he wants to buy a horse - a two hundred dollars horse, and…."

"Slow down. You didn't just let some strange man in the house, did you?"

"Oh, no, I had the pistol when I opened the door, and I kept it, but he wasn't that kind of man. He has silver hair and stands like this. He's very distinguished looking."

Her imitation of a man standing almost artificially straight should have been funny, but Cord was already disliking Mr. Adamson, whoever he was.

"Damn it, Annie, distinguished looking men aren't always saints. You shouldn't…."

She was too excited to pay a bit of attention. "Will you listen? He wants to buy a horse, a special horse, for a birthday present for his fourteen-year-old daughter. She's a good rider, and he wants something pretty and spirited enough to be fun but lady-broke and safe. He's going to Grenerton and he's going to look at Lathrum's horses and then he'll stop here on the way back day after tomorrow."

The words were just bubbling out of her. "Two hundred dollars. Isn't that a good price? Wouldn't that be a good sale?"

Cord looked at his wife, cheeks pink from the cold, eyes lit with anticipation, and mouth curved up in the smile he personally believed could melt rock. How was he was going to make her face reality without crushing her completely?

"Annie, I've never sold a horse for two hundred dollars, and if that's the kind he wants, Lathrum has much better horses. He'll find what he wants there and won't stop back here."

What he didn't tell her was that people generally bought his horses for half to two-thirds what they would pay someone else for the same animal. It was just one of life's ugly little realities.

Her face was already falling. "You mean we don't have any horses that fit that description?"

We - did she have any idea the way something twisted inside him when she said things like that? He sighed. "There are a couple, but you have to promise not to be disappointed when he doesn't

come back."

"I promise. Can I can come with you to get them?"

"You can help choose."

Her eyes were already shining again. Damn this stranger all to hell.

In the end they picked three horses. All were more refined than most of their herdmates and had pretty heads with big eyes and slightly dished profiles. Cord felt they all had the basic temperament Adamson was referring to.

Anne's favorite was a chestnut mare with a large even star on her forehead and small kiss-sized white snip between her nostrils. Her mane and tail were slightly lighter than her body color, and Anne named her Wild Honey.

Cord spent the afternoon starting all three horses on a quick refresher course of their saddle lessons. He rode the first horse carrying an old blanket, and when Anne asked, explained that lady-broke meant, among other things, unafraid of skirts. As far as Cord was concerned, if he was going to bother working horses in hopes of making a sale, he might as well put his best effort into it.

Far from disagreeing, Anne ran back in the house and got him real petticoats. The next day he worked each horse morning and afternoon for half an hour with a petticoat tied on the saddle on each side. The day after he gave each horse another short workout early in the morning, enough to be a reminder, not enough to tire the soft, unconditioned animals out.

Finished riding, Cord found Anne going over each horse with her sewing shears. "What the hell are you doing?"

"Well, they look so fuzzy in their winter hair. I thought I'd just neaten them up a bit."

She cut away, taking the long hairs that stuck out of the ears off and trimming the long coarse hair under the jaws and on the back of the legs. It did make them look better, but Cord balked when he found her carrying warm water from the house to wash their tails.

"Damn it, Annie, enough's enough. You're going to be in tears when the bastard doesn't show up anyway."

"I don't see how it can hurt. He wants something pretty for a birthday present for his daughter. We've gone this far."

The curdling dislike Cord felt for this man he'd never met was growing by the minute. They ate lunch in silence, Cord waiting for the first signs of unhappiness. By one o'clock he felt smothered and was thinking of just saddling something up and riding off. Shortly after one Foxface began to bark.

Meeting Adamson, Cord found it hard to sustain his dislike. The man was pleasant and businesslike. He looked at each of the three

horses carefully, making no comment about their neatened appearance or the clean, shining tails. He watched Cord ride each one, then asked to ride Wild Honey. He rode quietly and well, and the knot in Cord's stomach loosened a bit more. Dismounting, Adamson asked if the mare had ever been ridden by a woman. When Cord shook his head, Adamson asked if Anne could ride her.

"Don't have a sidesaddle."

"That's not a problem."

Minutes later, Anne got on the pretty chestnut mare.

"You ride her exactly the same as Lady," Cord said. "Walk her around and feel her out as you go. If you start to feel uncomfortable, quit. There's nothing to prove, you understand?"

She grinned at him knowingly. "Skirts. That's what we're proving isn't it?"

The two men watched her walk the mare around the corral, doing all the little circling and turning maneuvers Cord had taught her and then moving the horse into a slow trot.

Without taking his eyes from Anne and the horse Adamson spoke, "I envy you, you know. My wife has been dead for five years now. She didn't look at all like Mrs. Bennett, but she had the same appetite for life, same joy in living. After five years I still miss her as if it were yesterday. You have no idea how lucky you are, to be just starting a life with such a woman."

Cord made no response because he could think of none. *Starting a life*. If only Adamson knew. Anne finished her ride, cantering the mare in each direction around the corral. Adamson said nothing as Cord unsaddled the mare and turned her loose with the other two, and then asked, "Would that tall bay gelding in the next corral be broke the same?"

So he didn't like the mare. Cord looked over. "The fancy horse with four stockings? Yeah, they're all broke the same, but that's not a woman's horse. He'd be more for a man who likes something powerful and a little catty."

"Can I try him?"

"Sure." Cord saddled the tall bay, and Adamson rode him both in the corral and outside.

On the ground again, Adamson said briskly, "I don't like haggling, and I already told your wife I'd pay two hundred dollars for the kind of horse I want for my daughter. I'll give you the two hundred for the mare, and three seventy-five for the mare and the gelding. The problem is that I need them delivered to Mason to ship to Nebraska on Tuesday morning's train. My daughter's birthday is next week. They tell me they have no loading facilities and it means getting them in a cattle car right there at the station. The train only

stops for fifteen minutes. Are you willing to try?"

Cord leaned against the corral rails. "You take either, or only the two?"

"If I can have only one I'd rather have the mare, but I'll take either."

"Cash?"

"You bring bills of sale, and I'll have cash."

"All right. We'll be there."

As Cord and Anne walked with Adamson toward his tied livery gelding, he said, "Lathrum told me what he did to you over that colt. He's proud of it, but the more he talked, the sorrier he and his stock looked.

"Kind of expected you to find something you liked over there," Cord said. "He's got good horses."

"Oh, they're good, all right, but they way they're handled I wouldn't feel my daughter was safe on one. Fear doesn't make a reliable horse."

"Suppose not." Cord decided he liked the man after all. "Want to see the colt I got from him?"

Adamson halted, showing surprise. "He said it died on you."

"Should have. Dying isn't easy around my wife."

Adamson smiled at Anne. "I see. Yes, I'd like to see him."

The three of them looked at the colt in silence. Fortune was still thin but no longer a rack of bones. Even with the shaggy winter coat, it was easy to see quality in every line.

"Raoul told me he thought that might be the best colt Lathrum ever bred."

Cord nodded. "Thought that myself."

"Well." Adamson straightened and headed for his horse again. "I'll see you Tuesday then."

Three days ought to be just about enough time to make sure the money problem was solved for months to come.

* * *

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Chapter 18

ON TUESDAY MORNING ANNE RODE beside Cord bursting with pride. He had warned her she would be stiff tomorrow after the unaccustomed two hours in the saddle to town and two hours back, but she didn't care. She sat as straight as she could, trying to remember everything he had taught her over the last months and do it perfectly.

Cord finally glanced sideways at her and said, "You're allowed to relax and enjoy it, you know."

She laughed aloud, but she did relax, and how she did enjoy it! Adamson's horses trotted along on lead ropes, groomed until even their winter coats had a shine. Anne had, of course, trimmed the gelding with the scissors and washed his tail too. Cord had had to help. The bay horse had needed convincing he liked being fussed over that much.

After days of hard work, they had the night before discussed their strategy for getting the horses on the train and made their decision. They both now felt fatalistic. Either the work and the plan would pay off and the money problem would be solved or it wouldn't. The weather was cooperating. The early March day was bright and sunny, not too cold, and no wind.

When they were close enough to town to see that the 11:30 train was not early, they finished the ride at an easy walk, tying the horses across from the train station a little after eleven. An extraordinary number of people seemed interested in the train today.

Adamson spied them and hurried right over. "I know these are range raised horses, won't the train frighten them when it pulls in?"

"No," Cord said. "I bring all my young stock to town a few times. They've seen trains, and they'll take their cues from the saddle horses anyway."

"I'm afraid I'm responsible for the crowd. When I mentioned around town that I'd bought the horses contingent on their loading, everyone told me I was crazy, that they'll never get on the train in these circumstances. I already feel as if I've just wasted a lot of your time. These people are all here hoping to see a rodeo."

"Never try, never know." Cord was at his most laconic.

"I've employed Bob Windon and his assistant from the livery to give us a hand."

A few minutes later Windon walked over, followed by an adolescent boy carrying an ugly looking quirt. Windon was about Cord's age, a few inches shorter, starting to bald and running a little

to fat. He ran the town's livery stable and was Mason's resident expert on all things equine. Anne knew Bob liked and respected Cord, and today he wasn't trying to hide it.

"We gonna get treated to a show of Injun magic today?" he asked with a grin.

Cord drawled, "Nope. No rodeo either, lot of disappointed folks."

Windon's grin didn't falter. "They don't need a rodeo. They'll be happy if you can't get them on. You know that, don't you?"

"Yup."

The sound of the train came in the distance. Keeper and Lady barely pricked their ears as the train pulled in with clouds of steam, but Honey raised her head high and gave it a wide-eyed stare, and the gelding did her one better, fidgeting restlessly. Cord didn't move, leaning easily against Keeper. Anne tried to imitate him, but her heart was already pounding. As the train came to a full halt, men ran out, opened the door on the one cattle car and attached a ramp. Oh, Lord, did it look steep and narrow.

Cord muttered, "Let's take a look."

Adamson followed them up the steep ramp. The floor of the car was littered with straw, and the car itself was divided into sections by rails. They removed the rails on one side and put them against the back wall.

Outside, Cord said to Windon, "If you're helping, how about sending your boy for some hay and buckets? Nothing in there for them to eat or drink, and Lincoln's a ways."

Windon wiped the silly grin from his face and started looking thoughtful. The boy was furious, but headed back to the livery barn when ordered.

Back at the horses, Cord looked at Anne, questioning, "Ready?"

"As ready as I'll get."

"Remember, try to keep her from stopping in the doorway. If she stops and he's on the ramp he's liable to go off it sideways and he'll never start again."

She nodded, took the mare's rope, and started for the ramp as if there were no doubt in her mind what was going to happen. She knew Cord was right behind her with the gelding.

The crowd seemed to be holding its breath and let it out in a collective sigh when both horses walked up the steep ramp as if they'd done it every day of their lives. Grin back in place, Windon slid the car door shut after the gelding cleared the doorway.

When his assistant puffed back with two water buckets and a big sack of hay, he looked around in disbelief. "Where'd they go?"

Windon said, "Inside."

The boy looked like he wanted to weep over the unused quirt hanging from his belt.

"Now go fill those buckets about halfway and bring them along. We haven't got all day, you know."

Minutes later the horses were safe in a railed off section of the car, munching hay, buckets tied to the wall. Cord handed Adamson the bill of sale for the horses, and Adamson looked at it with amusement.

"Just one bill of sale? You knew they'd load, did you?"

"Had a notion." Cord pocketed the wad of bills uncounted.

Adamson turned to Anne. "Mrs. Bennett, it was a pleasure meeting you, and don't think I don't appreciate the way those horses look either. My daughter will be tickled with that mare. What's her name?"

"Wild Honey."

"Ah, and the gelding?"

"I'm afraid I've just been calling him Legs, but you could make it Captain Legs or something."

"Legs will do fine."

They shook hands again, and Anne gave Adamson a small packet of lumps of sugar. "To make them feel at home when they get there, you know."

Adamson swung on the train himself, and his last words were to Cord. "Envy. I truly envy you."

As they watched the train pull out, Cord said, "How about lunch at Dora's?"

Anne didn't even try to hide her delight. "It worked, didn't it? It was worth every minute of it."

They were leading Keeper and Lady toward the cafe when they spotted Ephraim and Martha standing in the dispersing crowd. Cord angled over that way and stopped in front of his brother and sister-in-law. "We're celebrating with steaks for lunch. You want to come along, we'll buy."

Anne half hoped Ephraim would say no, but after a brief hesitation, he proved he could recognize an olive branch when it was thrust under his nose as well as the next man and accepted the invitation. They all headed up the street to the cafe together.

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Chapter 19

THE BENNETTS HAD NO MORE than taken care of their coats and hats and seated themselves in the cafe when Rob Wells came in. Anne knew if her brother was here it was under orders from their father, and her family was not going to spoil her day.

Rob rudely ignored everyone else. “Anne, I want to talk to you. Alone.” The last word followed a baleful glance at Cord.

Anne fussed with her chair, deliberately avoiding looking at Rob. “I’m having a grand day, a superb day, a wonderful day. Go away.”

“I won’t go away. I want to talk to you, and without *him* listening.”

Cord sat next to the window, watching the street outside as if nothing he heard concerned him in any way.

Anne hardened her expression and met Rob’s gaze. “I’ll tell you what, we’re buying Ephraim and Martha lunch. Sit down, we’ll buy you lunch too. You don’t have to be nice, just civil, and if you are, after lunch, I’ll listen to whatever talking to you want to give me on my failings over at another table for five minutes. But if you call either me or Cord one nasty name, your time expires right then. Deal?”

“He’s not buying me anything.”

“All right, then, buy your own. Or go away. That’s the only way I’m talking to you.”

Rob sat down like a sullen child. Anne paid him no further attention, making small talk with Martha about the fine weather and some of the people they knew who had been in the crowd watching the train.

Not only was Rob behaving badly, Anne noticed that Ephraim wasn’t helping Martha carry the conversation but was studying Cord as Dora brought coffee cups, filled them, and took lunch orders. Anne thought he looked only slightly less sour than Rob, but after Dora left, Ephraim made an effort.

“I heard you got good money for those horses.”

Cord’s light eyes flicked upwards from a study of his coffee cup. “A record for me. Anne sold them.”

A warm glow suffused Anne at these words. She did not come from a family that bestowed credit upon its female members for helping with the family business. Rob’s startled look only increased her pleasure.

Ephraim looked slightly surprised himself, but asked, “How did you come to sell to him anyway?”

This required more answer than Cord was going to give. He started staring intently out the cafe window, in effect turning his back. Ephraim's disgusted expression would not have moved Anne to try and smooth things over, but she was eager to tell anybody everything about the sale to Adamson. She launched into the story immediately, gesturing for emphasis, delighted by the incredulous looks on her listeners' faces.

Anne told of Adamson's first visit, the petticoats, the second visit, and then the past three days of leading those horses through every dark, narrow doorway on the ranch. Of the imitation train ramp Cord built and how they led the horses over it and over it, moving it in front of the doorways, over a ditch so that it would ring hollow, and up the sides of the creek bed so that it would slant at a steep angle in approximation of the climb into the railroad car.

She told how they discovered the mare was trusting enough to follow her almost anywhere. The gelding would fuss but would follow the mare if she went quietly, and so they developed the system of her leading the mare with Cord following close behind with the gelding.

Finally, overjoyed by the cleverness of it all, she told about the three bills of sale in three different pockets, one for each horse and one for both. Mr. Adamson would never know that they hadn't really been all that confident that both horses would load so easily, had just thought there was a good chance they might.

Rob, of course, jumped in with criticism as soon as Anne finished her story. "That's dangerous. You shouldn't be around horses like that. The only horse you ever even petted was old Mollie. You'll get hurt."

"I'm around all the horses all the time now. I rode to town today."

"So now he's got you on his horses. I bet he's got you astride and in trousers, and if you fall off, all he'll worry about is the horse."

Since Anne wasn't wearing trousers and had gone to a lot of trouble to divide several skirts so that she could ride astride without them hiking up, she ignored that part of Rob's accusations. "I may not be the best rider in the world, but I've never fallen off. Teaching me so I'm halfway decent at it is Cord's Christmas present."

Rob's reaction was to be expected, but Anne did not understand why her words seemed to affect Martha and Ephraim so. Perhaps she sounded boastful? It was hard not to be proud of a skill that had been denied her all her life. A look at Cord reassured her. There was nothing but amusement in his eyes.

With lunch finished, Ephraim ordered pie and expressed

surprise Cord wasn't interested.

"If you'd ever tasted what Annie cooks, you wouldn't want Dora's pie either."

Rob actually looked at Cord as he said nastily, "I suppose you keep her around for her cooking."

Cord said, "Sure, just like you're going to marry somebody for her cooking."

Anne explained to him. "Rob isn't going to marry for cooking or any other reason except that my father told him to marry Nancy Lee Weinert."

"You mean he picked George Detrick for you, and Nancy Lee Weinert for Rob? Seems like to be consistent he should have either picked Ross Christian for you or Widow Truckee for Rob."

Anne almost spit coffee on the table with sudden laughter. Ross Christian was, like Nancy Lee, young, very good looking, self-centered, and not very bright. Widow Truckee was a very good approximation of George Detrick, fiftyish, fat, dirty-looking, and unpleasant.

Rob ignored the humor in the comment. "That's ridiculous. Nancy Lee is a beautiful girl from a good family and will be an excellent wife, and you know George Detrick would have been a decent husband. Maybe he isn't the knight in shining armor you had your heart set on, but you should have treated Richard Tyler better if that's what you wanted. Mr. Detrick is well situated, respectable, and, and…." He searched for Detrick's other virtues.

Cord finished for him. "And white, Annie. He's white."

She made a face. "I don't care if you could scrub him up and he'd put new fallen snow to shame and his toenails grow gold. He's repulsive and disgusting, and I'd rather not talk about him over food."

Rob attacked again. "At least he would have *married* you. Sitting out there and pretending you're married just to get even with Father you're just hurting yourself. What if he gets you with child for God's sake?"

Anne said sweetly, "I'd count myself lucky. Ephraim, do you ever give family members legal advice?"

Ephraim nodded. "Now and then."

"Then tell me. That day in the yard we were certainly battered and bloody, but we repeated every word of the marriage vows after Reverend Pratt in front of eight witnesses, and as soon as Cord was well enough we came to town and got a marriage certificate. Reverend Pratt signed it, Cord and I signed it, and Mr. Benton and Mr. White, who were there that day and were witnesses, signed it. We saw it entered in the church records, and it's entered in the

county records at the courthouse. Are we married, or do we need to go see the preacher in Grenerton tomorrow to make an honest woman of me?"

Cord muttered, "Every word except 'obey.'"

Anne wrinkled her nose at him in mock annoyance. "I think you're developing a fixation on that, you know."

Ephraim seemed to be having trouble with an answer but finally cleared his throat and said, "I guess I'd say you're as married as anybody."

Rob leaned across the table toward her. "You can't mean it. You *signed* something with that animal? Are you out of your mind? Don't you realize nobody meant it? You could have walked away?"

"I meant it, and that's all that counts. Make up your mind, Rob, you can't be furious because I'm a shameless hussy living in sin, and furious because I'm a respectable married woman too. Pick a mad."

Rob got up and walked out.

Cord said, "Guess we're buying him lunch after all."

Anne laughed in agreement, and then added, "And I got out of the five-minute lecture."

Before anyone could say more, Noah Reynolds walked up to the table and dropped into the chair Rob had vacated.

Cord said, "If you've come for a free lunch, Noah, you're too late."

"No, I've eaten. I heard you were in town and decided to talk to you two. You know there's a lot of ugly talk going around?"

"Heard some."

Anne asked, "Like what?"

Cord answered with his best drawl. "Some folks think I keep you locked in the root cellar most of the time. Some think I keep you tied to the bed. I kind of like the bed theory better - warmer."

Aghast, she looked back and forth between the two men. "How can anybody think such a stupid thing? I'm sitting right here aren't I? What's wrong with them?"

Noah said, "Sometimes if a woman's scared enough of a man, she'll kind of go along with him and not ask for help or try to get away. It happens."

She spit words at him. "Do I look scared to you? You know better than that."

"Sure, I know better, but these folks in town don't, and they keep kicking it around. If you don't do something to quiet some of the talk you're going to have a mob in your yard again one of these days. You don't want that, do you?"

"The next mob in our yard is going to get shot at. I know how now, you know. What are you suggesting we do to quiet the talk,

move to another country?"

Noah sighed. "Now, Anne, nothing that drastic. Why don't you try coming to church again? Let people see enough of you to know that you're fine and nobody's forcing you to do anything."

"Because I don't care to spend my Sundays in church listening to Reverend Yellow-Belly Pratt telling people how to be good Christians, that's why! If I sat in that church and listened to him for five minutes I'd probably be running up to the pulpit and socking him right in his sniveling nose."

Spoiling for a fight now, Anne turned her glare on Cord. "And how is it that you know about this talk and I haven't heard a word?"

Cord was studying an empty plate with great care, but answered readily enough, "I walked into the feed store a few weeks ago when old Charlie Haggerty was going on about it. Didn't see me till too late."

"And I suppose you spoke right up and straightened him out."

"Assuming he'd believe me, have a heart, Annie. Poor old man probably thinks about it for an hour every night before he gets up the courage to climb into bed with that prune of a wife of his."

Anne lost the fight to stay offended. The corners of her mouth started twitching upward.

Noah tried again. "Will you think about it, please? You don't need more trouble."

Anne said, "All right, we'll *think* about it."

Cord stood up and began counting money on the table. Anne said goodbye to Martha and Ephraim and followed him out to the horses.

Through the window Ephraim watched Cord and Anne get on their horses and start down the street knee to knee and felt a sharp stab of regret. *Oh, little brother, how did things ever come to this pass between us?* The sheriff's rueful words drew Ephraim's attention back inside.

"That woman's changed a lot in the last months, although I guess you don't get tempered steel out of the fire unless what goes in is steel first." Noah ran his fingers through his thinning gray hair and grinned.

Ephraim asked, "How much of the story of how they got married do you know, Noah?"

"I guess I know about all of it. At least Anne said she told me everything. Her father sent me out there to bring her back. Said he'd go himself but he was afraid of running into more Bennetts, even though Cord deserved killing. Of course, when I got there, Cord was alive, and Anne wouldn't come back."

"Well, we don't know what really happened, and it seems like

high time we found out."

Surprise showed on Noah's face. "You mean they never told you?"

"The first time Frank and I went out there we made a lot of assumptions, which it seems were all wrong. Anne was furious, and I suppose she's never really forgiven us, and you know Cord. He's never going to explain anything."

"I guess I never thought about it. He said she ran you out of the house, but when I thought it over, I figured he was pulling my leg. I mean, a woman running Frank…."

Eph cut him off. "Noah, nobody's a better judge of women than Frank, and God knows he's had too much gun experience, even forgetting those years in the war. It was Frank who decided to go and go fast. He said she wasn't bluffing, from the look of her she really *wanted* to let go with the rifle right there in the house. He figures she's a little crazy from what happened."

"She was a little crazy when I first got there, but small wonder. She looks fine to me now. It's a bit of a story, but I'll tell you if you've got the time."

Ephraim pulled out his watch. "No, I don't today. I'm going to be late for an appointment as it is. Could we talk you into Sunday dinner at our house? This is probably a story Frank needs to hear too."

Noah agreed to join the Bennetts for Sunday dinner readily enough, and when the next day Leona Wells stopped Ephraim on the street, asking about Anne, Ephraim invited Leona to the house Sunday also. He even extended the invitation to Rob, knowing Leona wouldn't come without an escort. Maybe hearing what Noah had to say would be good for Anne's mother and brother too.

Ephraim knew Martha would have no trouble setting an extra place for the sheriff on Sunday. For years all the Bennetts had gathered at their house after church. There had been a time when Cord showed up pretty regularly too, in spite of the family difficulties.

That had ended a couple of years ago when Luke and Pete, like Frank before them, had come home from an eastern college early and refused to return. The problem was that the boys began to do everything they could think of to provoke a fight with their uncle. Like cocky youngsters everywhere, they were sure of their own invincibility, sure if they had the chance, they could vanquish the family legend.

Ephraim had tried everything he could think of to dissuade Pete without success, and he knew Frank had tried just as hard with both boys with an equal lack of success. Unable to control their sons,

Ephraim and Frank had tried to talk to Cord. That talk had been successful, since Cord turned and walked away after the first two sentences. He hadn't been to a family gathering since.

Conversation was casual and general through dinner. As the women began to clear the dishes, Rob and Leona Wells arrived, and Frank sent his younger children off to visit friends.

Rob lost no time making his feelings known. "My father told us exactly what happened. There's no need for this."

Ephraim felt some sympathy for Leona Wells, but wondered if inviting her had been a mistake when it meant Rob's angry presence. Then again, Frank was just as much against hearing what Noah would say, but for different reasons.

"It's bad enough having a good idea what happened without hearing the details. I'd rather not know," he said when Ephraim first told him about his invitation to the sheriff. But Frank was at the table now, smoking one of his thin black cigars and looking unhappy.

Judith and Martha were also there, as were Luke and Pete, grinning and curious.

Ephraim caught Noah's eye and nodded, letting him know it was time to start the story he'd come to tell.

Noah didn't just start in, though. He looked around the table and said, "I've got to tell you this isn't a story ladies can hear. I think the women folk ought to wait in the other room."

Martha was having none of that. "Noah, Cord is like one of my own sons. I'd take it as a personal favor if you'd just tell your story. It would be easier than making Ephraim repeat it later, and if some of what you have to say is too terrible I have the sense to leave the room when you get to it. I expect the same is true of Judith and Leona."

Looking around at the grim-faced women, Noah nodded a reluctant consent. Then he told how Edward came to him and what he found at the ranch and most of what Anne told him when refusing to go home.

At first he was interrupted frequently by Rob, shouting explosively, "I don't believe it!"

Just as Ephraim had had enough of the interruptions and was ready to tell Rob to keep quiet or leave, Frank took care of it for him.

"I'm having some real trouble believing it myself," he said. "Suppose the two us just keep our mouths shut anyway and listen."

Frank's look made it clear that if Rob didn't keep his mouth shut he wasn't going to be around much longer to object to anything.

When Noah finished the story of what Anne had told him, he said, “Now that’s just what she said, of course, but I’ve got to tell you being a lawman means being officially nosey, and so as soon as I had the time I did some asking around. Anne’s right about Pratt being lily-livered, I couldn’t get anything out of him, and White clammed up on me too, but Mike Benton is tearing himself to pieces with guilt over having been there and not at least riding off like Brown did. He talked to me, and what he said tracked with Anne’s story right down the line.”

Ephraim had already accepted they were hearing the truth. Frank was still having trouble with it.

“We saw him only a day later. He was in bed - we figured he’d had some ribs stove in - but he didn’t look hurt that bad.”

“If you saw him all tucked under blankets he wouldn’t look too bad,” Noah said. “His face looked about like he’d been in a bad fight. They didn’t waste much time on his face. I got to admit to you, Frank, I stopped on the way home from there and was sick by the road. I’ve never seen a man beaten like that and still alive. It’s hard to believe all that got broke was his ribs - they didn’t miss an inch of him.” Noah made a gesture right over his whole body.

“Anne said it was the kicking after he was down, but it was all over, even down his legs and feet. Doc Craig says it was weeks before he decided he wasn’t dying slow, he was getting better. But, you see, I thought he was with you then. It never occurred to me Anne was still out there alone with him. When the two of them showed up in town together you could have knocked me over with a feather. I just wouldn’t have figured a woman like that would have anything to do with him once he got better. Surprises me even more they seem to get along pretty good. The way she sasses him he don’t scare her any.”

After thanking Martha for the dinner, Noah took himself off. Luke and Pete followed Noah out, leaving Rob and Leona and the four older Bennetts sitting in silence around the kitchen table.

Ephraim looked at his wife and said, “Do you want to say you told us so?”

Martha just shook her head.

Grateful that Martha wasn’t going to rub it in, Ephraim admitted, “I knew from what we heard in the cafe the other day how wrong we were. Anne didn’t understand what she was really telling us, but he did. How did we ever let it come to this, Frank? We took the haters’ word for it, and we should have known better.”

Frank buried his head in his hands and groaned, “Maybe. Martha, is there any whiskey around? I sure could use a drink.”

Martha went to a cupboard and brought back a bottle of

whiskey and one of sherry and poured drinks for everyone.

Leona Wells looked very much the way her daughter would in twenty years, but showed none of the spirit so evident in Anne in the Bennetts' recent encounters with her. Now, looking pathetically unhappy, Leona sipped her sherry and shuddered.

Still trying to find some ground for disbelief, she voiced a tremulous objection. "My daughter was raised better than that. She wouldn't walk in that man's house. Why would she walk in that man's house?"

Ephraim had listened to every word of the story carefully, not inhibited by disbelief. "Mrs. Wells, tell me, exactly how much had she had to eat, say in the week before she got to Cord's?"

Leona didn't have to answer in words. The look on her face was answer enough.

Rob eventually got his mother calmed down enough to take her home, making it clear he still didn't believe a word of it. They left four quiet and thoughtful people behind.

"So what are we going to do?" Frank said, voicing what was on all their minds.

"There's nothing we can do," Ephraim said. "You know if we went out there and tried to apologize he'd just turn his back and walk away. Buying Martha and me lunch the other day was a peace offering of a sort. We'd better leave it."

So they decided to leave it because they didn't know what else to do.

* * *

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Chapter 20

ANNE BROUGHT UP WHETHER THEY should attend church several times in their night talks. In the end, they decided to go.

She never mentioned her real reason for pursuing the matter - she wanted to see Cord dressed up in his new suit, which he had not worn since Christmas. She felt it might be nice to let him get a good look at her all dressed up too.

Cord clearly wasn't enthused about spending time at the service, but said he didn't mind Sunday as a day of rest. He was also blunt about not wanting another mob in the yard. If Noah Reynolds thought church might pacify the town, he was willing to give it a try.

The first problem was that Anne didn't think Keeper was a suitable buggy horse. She tried to dance subtly around the point, but Cord went right the heart of the matter. "Not pretty enough for you, huh?"

"Well, he's pretty enough, but he looks like what he is, a man's saddle horse. A buggy horse should be more, more…."

"Pretty."

"No," she searched for the right word, "More elegant." She hurried on to take the sting out of her words. "Don't you have a horse that's just a little more refined or something that isn't a very good saddle horse anyway?"

At her words, Cord grew thoughtful. The next day he took Anne out in the pastures and pointed out a group of horses he said were disappointingly small and short-strided. He had culled the mares that produced them, like Lady, from the broodmare band, but there were still half a dozen of the small, rather pretty animals on the ranch.

"Every year I think I should round them up and run them through an auction, but I hate to see them end up as meat. Would one of them do?"

"Oh, yes, that's exactly the right kind of horse."

"Choose."

She chose a black mare with very low almost matching white socks behind and named her Silverheels, Silvie for short.

"Will it take long before she can pull the buggy?"

"No, they're all already saddle broke. Week or so will make a buggy horse."

Cord began working the little mare for harness, but they didn't go to church the next Sunday after all.

Anne felt especially pretty in a dark blue dress with lighter blue

trim and a rather pert hat that went well with the outfit, and Cord looked every bit as good as she had imagined in the suit. Just as they were almost ready to walk out the door, however, he suddenly gave her a hard look.

"What the hell have you got on? You look different."

Hurt, she replied, "It's one of my best dresses for church. What don't you like about it?"

"The dress is pretty. You look strange. All squashed in and hard." A long index finger poked at her rib cage.

Indignant now, and understanding, she answered loftily, "I have a corset on. I can't go to church without wearing a proper foundation."

"You're slim enough you look just fine without that thing. What if you can't breathe and you pass out in church right in front of the whole town? They'll think I did something."

"It's not even laced tightly. I can breathe just fine. You just don't want to go. Why didn't you say so before we went to all this trouble?"

"I'm willing to go. Just take that thing off. It's probably bad for your innards to be all trussed up like that."

She had, in fact, after months of not wearing one, forgotten how miserably confining the garment was, but she wasn't going to tell him that. He was the same as every other man she'd ever known, telling her how to dress.

Furious, she said, "Forget it. I'm not going to church looking like a trollop. No corset, no church." She stormed back to the bedroom and began to change to everyday clothes.

Leaning in the doorway watching her, he drawled, "Trollops wear those things, you know, black ones - or red."

Madder than ever, she snapped, "It's certainly nice to know my husband is such an expert on trollops. Maybe you ought to start taking one to church."

She pushed past him and banged the kettle down on the stove. Maybe a cup of tea would help calm her down. Her tea was made and she was sipping it when it came to her that Cord's preference for her natural shape was not really a criticism - it might even be construed as a compliment. Perhaps she really had gotten too angry too fast.

Then it occurred to her that he was taking much longer than it would take him to change his clothes. Curious, and thinking she might even apologize, she went to take a peek in the bedroom. Gawking at the sight that met her eyes, she told herself, I should be angry. I must be angry. But it took all her strength not to double over with laughter.

He had indeed changed his clothes, and then had gone through her things and found her other corset. Made especially to go under fancy gowns, it was edged all around with lace, and bits of lace were now floating through the air as Cord very methodically used the knife he always had somewhere on him to cut the two corsets into tiny pieces.

It was certainly fortunate that the dress she had chosen for church, although fashionably draped at the back, was not bustled. Most of her wardrobe was going to need modifying before she could wear it without provoking mayhem. Anne walked further into the room, giving up the fight to stay angry. What she wanted to do was start pulling the small bits of lace out of the black hair, smooth them out of the wings of his eyebrows, sit down on the bed beside him and have him hold her and kiss her, but she knew that wasn't going to happen.

Instead she sat a careful distance from him and said, "All right, you win. I'll never even think about wearing a corset again, to church or any place else, but you remember in ten years when I'm not so slim and you start to think maybe I'd look better all trussed up, you're going to have to request me to wear one, complete with please."

Cord watched her walk out of the room and thought *in ten years. I wonder if I'll even know where she is in ten years.*

The next Sunday they made it to church.

Since the purpose of attending services was to pacify the townspeople, Cord decided no matter how things stood with his brothers, folks might as well be reminded that he was part of a large and clannish family. He made sure that they arrived early enough Sunday morning to join the rest of the Bennetts as they walked from Ephraim's to the church.

He was spared introductions. Anne was not only already acquainted with all the Bennetts, she had told him that Frank's wife, Judith, was one of the women her family regularly held up to her as a model of all she should be and wasn't. Even featured, still slim after bearing Frank three sons and a daughter, the pale blonde beauty usually had a serene air about her.

Cord, however, had over the years endured quite enough of the half-crazed behavior his mere presence often provoked in Judith. He had strong ideas about which woman ought to be emulating the other and had told Anne so. Anne's quick, mischievous smile at him after she greeted Judith told him she was remembering what he had to say on the subject.

Frank and Judith's three youngest children, Gil, Martin, and Beth, were properly polite, but Cord did not miss the contemplative

way Luke, Frank's oldest at 21, and Ephraim's son, Pete, who was the same age, regarded Anne. They were wondering if there was a way to use her to provoke the fight they were spoiling for. And damn them, they might be right that they now had a lever they could use to get what they wanted.

Anne looked surprised to find herself sandwiched among Bennetts in a pew close to the front of the church, but it wasn't long before she focused such an unforgiving glare on Pratt that he started stuttering. For the first time in his memory, Cord found the service entertaining.

As they left the church, Cord heard a moan, and Leona Wells enveloped his wife in a hug, weeping uncontrollably. Maybe Rob couldn't get her home yelling at her, but this just might do it.

Anne got her mother seated on one of the benches in the churchyard and he heard her say, "Now, Mother, either you stop crying right now, or I'm just going home without even talking to you. Come on now, I'm fine, get hold of yourself."

Feeling definitely better, Cord headed for the buggy, only to find Armand and Helene LeClerc petting his new buggy horse.

"Morning, Mr. LeClerc, ma'am."

"Armand, call me Armand, and my wife Helene. From a man whose wife wears one of my prettiest rings I want no mister. This is your horse, yes?"

"Yeah, Anne had a notion what kind of horse should pull a buggy, so she picked her out. Too small for a saddle horse anyway."

Armand's round cheerful face fell. "Then she's not for sale? My wife and I used to have a buggy horse. We spent many a happy hour driving around. We had no particular place to go. It was just for fun, but we could never find another one like him when he got too old. I could pay you a hundred and fifty dollars for a horse like this. We're not horsemen. We need something that doesn't frighten us on the ground or in the buggy."

Seeing LeClercs talking to Cord, Anne almost dragged her mother over as fast as she could and heard this last. "Why, Mr. LeClerc, Mother had exactly the same problem after our old Mollie died. You're right, Silvie would be just perfect for you."

"Silvie?"

"Her name is Silverheels, but we call her Silvie."

"Ah, such a pretty name for such a pretty mare. Well, if she's your own special horse…."

Anne winked at him. "Just a minute." She pulled Cord to one side. "Would it be awful to let them have her? They were so nice to us. I liked that bay with the narrow blaze too. Couldn't you just work him for us? Is a hundred and fifty dollars a terrible price?"

"It's highway robbery for a horse like that."

"But it's worth it to them. She'd *suit* them."

"If one of the others will suit *you*, sell her."

Anne turned back to the elderly couple. "Mr. LeClerc."

"Armand, Armand and Helene."

"Armand, why don't you and Helene take a drive around town with Cord and make sure Silvie is really just what you want, and if she is, you can have her for a hundred and fifty dollars. There's a bay gelding I almost picked he's going to fix for me - unless you'd rather come to the ranch and choose from several."

"No, no, we can't believe you have anything nicer than this lady." Armand and Helene were still stroking the soft muzzle.

Cord drove the little mare through town with Armand, then watched as the LeClercs took turns driving. On their final swoop past the church, Helene had the reins, and the two were laughing like children.

Cord tugged his hat down lower over his eyes. Such unrestrained merriment embarrassed him. Still, he drove LeClercs to their doorstep and promised to deliver the mare the next Sunday and stay for dinner. Anne would enjoy visiting with the couple again.

Anne left her mother and brother in the churchyard as he halted the horse in the street. It appeared that Leona Wells had never stopped crying, and Rob was still glowering at them both.

On the way home Cord probed a little. "How was your mother?"

"Weepy."

"And your brother?"

"Self-righteously disapproving."

She dismissed the whole subject as unimportant. "Do you suppose in addition to Willie you should harness break another of those little horses to sell?"

"Willie?"

"Sweet William, the bay gelding."

"Mm. Maybe."

Cord wondered if he ought to warn Bob Windon that he was in danger of being put out of business soon.

EDWARD WELLS HAD BEEN ANGRY when he'd realized his daughter would not come home. When he realized she was not in Chicago as everyone supposed, his fury knew no bounds. In Edward's opinion Anne needed to spend the rest of her life living like a recluse in Chicago to mitigate the disgrace she had brought on the family.

At first, Edward, like his son, had maintained that Anne was not really married. After Rob reported the conversation over lunch with Ephraim and Martha, and after a raging confrontation with Reverend Pratt, Wells admitted to himself that his daughter was indeed married to the regrettably still alive half-breed.

Having for years been obsessed with seeing his daughter married, Edward was now obsessed with seeing her marriage ended. He would have liked to just ride out to the ranch with another mob and take her, but Edward knew that when the Double M men left town two of them had gunshot wounds. He had heard rumors about how they got those wounds. Thinking Cord could have shot two men so soon after a beating that should have killed him disturbed Edward, so he pushed the thought out of his mind. And he knew the half-breed was never going to be caught unawares like that again.

Edward only attended church on Easter and one or two other occasions a year. Rob, however, dutifully reported Anne's presence at Sunday services, and further that she had talked to Leona and to him while Cord was off selling a horse. Hearing this, Edward didn't bother concealing his smile. If his daughter was going to be in town under such circumstances, it shouldn't be too difficult to get her back under his control again shortly.

Actually, it would take Edward several weeks to find the kind of man he wanted and to make arrangements for what he wanted done.

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Chapter 21

ANNE WAS DELIGHTED TO FIND that behind the house near the creek there was an orchard of fruit trees. Cord's father had planted them many years ago, and they had not been tended since the family moved to the big house. Apple, peach, plum, and cherry - all were still producing to some extent. Cord helped himself to fresh fruit when it was in season but did nothing about the orchard. Anne began planning pies, cobblers, jams, and a winter supply of preserved fruit.

Even better was her discovery of a patch of wild strawberries, also a legacy of Jamie Bennett's early years on the ranch. Near the strawberries was a rectangle of ground that showed signs of long-ago cultivation, and she began to make plans for a large garden in the same spot.

Cord seemed indifferent to all these plans except for a sardonic remark that if she were going to keep hand feeding the horses she should plant the whole thing with carrots. They were better for the horses than the sugar she filled her pockets with every morning.

Anne purchased small quantities of all the seeds she wanted and ten times more carrots than should be necessary for two people at Miles' store. The next day she eagerly searched the carriage shed, found a shovel, and started for the garden spot.

Cord caught her halfway. "What are you doing with the shovel?"

"I'm going to start digging up the garden."

"You're not digging anything."

"You can't garden without turning the ground," she said reasonably. "I'm going to take several days and do it little by little."

"No, you're not."

She thrust the shovel at him. "All right, then you do it."

"I'm not digging up anything that size with a shovel either."

Her temper took immediate flight. "Then why didn't you say so yesterday instead of acting like it was all right and letting me waste money on all those seeds? Damn you, why couldn't you just open your mouth and *say* something for a change?"

Humiliated to find she was sobbing by the end of this, she turned and ran for the house.

Cord watched her fleeing figure with a sinking feeling. This was not at all what he had intended, and he had no idea how to undo it. With a sigh, he returned the shovel to the shed and saddled up one of the three-year-olds he was now working for a long ride.

Anne was angrier than she'd ever been before, not exactly

refusing to speak but coldly distant. That night there was no cheek against his shoulder, no fingers curved around his arm muscles, but a space between them and her back toward him, accusing.

The next morning through the kitchen window he noticed a small patch of turned earth in the garden area. On his way to the barn he gathered up every implement that might be used for digging and buried them in the hay in the hay barn. He was now feeling as stubbornly furious as she was.

Two days later they were still stalking around each other in almost total silence. Cord waited for the fatal words - I've had enough of this, I've had enough of you, I want to go to Grenerton, I want to go home, I want to be anywhere but here.

His mood didn't improve when Foxface sounded an alarm, and Frank rode into the yard. He had arrived at lunch time, and Anne politely invited him to eat with them, but it was only minutes before Frank sensed the angry currents swirling around the room.

"I'd say you two aren't getting along too well," he said.

Anne showed no more inclination to respond to this than Cord.

Frank's sympathies, of course, all went in one direction. "Anne, if you want help to…."

He got no further. Anne's fists banged on the table, making the dishes rattle, then she was on her feet, absolutely screaming, days of pent up fury exploding all at once.

"Don't you say it. So help me if you say it, I won't just run you out of the house, I'll *shoot* you. We're having a fight, and it's none of your business. Don't you tell me in over twenty years of marriage you and your wife never had a marital quarrel. I'm so mad at him I'd like to beat him worse than Meeks did. I'd like to shoot him so full of holes he could be a sieve. I'd like to cut off his head and bury it somewhere far away from his body, but I'll get over it. We'll work it out and life will go on, and in the meantime, it's none of your *business*."

Feelings vented, Anne ran out the front door, slamming it so hard the whole house seemed to quiver.

Frank actually looked shaken as he asked, "Does she get like that often?"

"Nope, you seem to rile her." Cord knew quite well how very few women had ever disconcerted his brother.

"*I* rile her? She wants to kill you, dismember you, and disperse your body parts, and *I* rile her?"

"You kind of rub her the wrong way."

Glancing at his brother now and then as if to keep alert for further lunacies, Frank got busy finishing his lunch.

Cord ate the rest of his food without tasting it, his spirits rising

steadily. These past days of hell were not the end of everything, they were a "marital quarrel," and they were going to work it out. He wanted to say the words aloud and taste them. He had vague recollections of Judith walking around the big house looking stiff and steely-eyed and Frank banging and cursing, of Martha and Ephraim acting the same way. A marital quarrel.

Frank got around to what he had come for. "Look, Cord, you know Eph and I would like to have you come to the house Sundays. You know why you can't."

Cord felt irritation at having to think about something else right then. "Yeah, I know. Don't worry about it."

"They're our *sons*."

"If they want it bad enough, they'll get it sooner or later, no matter what you do. You know that."

"Maybe not. I'm not going to sit by and watch you beat my son to death, brother or no."

"I'm not going to kill your damn son, Frank. If you don't know it, you should."

Frank stood up, conflicting emotions showing in his face. "I don't know it. I don't believe it. I wish I did."

Cord shrugged and didn't reply as Frank walked out. There was no sign of Anne anywhere as he walked to the barn. He didn't look for her but just threw work harness on Keeper and headed for the carriage shed, starting what he had intended to do days ago.

Anne was sitting behind the barn with Foxface curled beside her and a lap full of barn cats. She had stopped crying, and her anger was beginning to dissolve. Having Frank Bennett of all people catch her fighting with her husband and letting him goad her into losing control made everything worse.

She was ready to put it all aside and try to forget about the garden. She would give the seeds to her mother next Sunday and be done with it. The trouble was that as the months passed, she liked Cord more and more, and this was spoiling things. She would never like him quite so much again. If he'd said something when she first mentioned a garden, but to wait and then pull what she could only see as an exercise of power over her. She really had been foolish to believe he wasn't like that. Well, as her mother said, it was her bed of thorns.

The shadows were lengthening. She could hear noises in the barn that told her he was beginning evening chores, but she went back to the house, avoiding him as she had for the last several days. Tomorrow morning, she thought, I will get up and act as if it never happened and it doesn't matter. There will be other times like this over the years, and I'm going to learn to handle it.

Anne was alone in the bed when she woke in the morning. She knew Cord didn't expect her to come to the barn with him anyway and had not bothered to wake her. But today she was going to stop the childish display of temper. So determined, she went out to the kitchen and started preparing breakfast.

Glancing through the kitchen window, she caught sight of the garden area. For the past days the sight had been an aggravation, but now she stared unbelieving. Then she walked slowly outside to stand at the edge of the plot. It's not just plowed, she thought, he's done something more. I couldn't rake it any finer. She swallowed hard, feeling all at once very small.

Cord was almost finished in the barn, pouring milk into low pans for the cats. He became very still as Anne approached. For once she was having trouble meeting his eyes. "Cord?"

He leaned over and filled another pan, not answering.

"I don't blame you if you're not feeling very forgiving. I did the same thing your family always does, didn't I? Took a fast look at things and jumped to the very worst conclusion possible."

"I could have explained."

"Maybe you would have if I hadn't been so busy calling you names." Anne's voice was a husky whisper. "I'm sorry, really. I wish I could promise it won't ever happen again, but I can't even do that. I'll try. Trusting seems to be the hardest part."

"Just grow something worth eating in the damn thing after all this, will you."

She gave him a small watery smile. "Are you still angry?"

"No, I'm not angry."

Her smile broadened a bit. "There might not be room for anything for us to eat after I plant all the carrots."

They walked to the house together, at peace for the first time in days, both convinced they were never going through anything like that again.

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Chapter 22

THE NEXT SUNDAY CORD WATCHED Anne's unforgiving glares have the usual effect on Reverend Pratt with amusement. Maybe he ought to point out to her that the stuttering meant the service took longer, more time having to pretend to listen to Pratt's hypocritical platitudes.

When church finally let out, he headed back to where they had left the buggy, leaving Anne with her mother under Rob's surly guard and the Bennetts watching over Luke and Pete as if they were baby chicks and a hawk was visible in the sky.

He pulled off his jacket and tie and folded them across the buggy seat, drinking in deep breaths of the spring air, admiring the pale yellow-green halos on the trees that were just beginning to leaf out. Maybe today they'd stop somewhere on the road on the way home to eat the lunch Anne packed instead of eating in the buggy as the horse clipped along the way they had been doing. The day was too pretty not to take time and enjoy it.

A short scream from Leona brought him out of this reverie. A quick glance in that direction had him transferring the knife in his boot to the back of his belt, and starting back toward the church.

When the big man pushed her mother to the ground and circled her throat with a dirty arm, a wave of fear so intense her vision blurred swept through Anne. She struggled for breath, the memory of Lem Samuels' assault leaving her frozen and unable to react. The brute dragged her up onto the wooden sidewalk in front of the first shops close to the church. He stopped by two other big strangers, and said, "He's coming. He heard the mother."

The men stood there, waiting, and then Anne saw him. Cord. At the sight, she found herself able to breathe again. He walked to the center of the street, then stood stock-still, didn't move even when the man holding her pulled a knife and used it to rip her hat off and loosen her hair until it fell around her shoulders.

As Anne's panic receded, she realized the man holding her had started to breathe hard and fast, as if he had exerted himself, but he had not. He's afraid, she thought, and he should be.

Cord's stillness was that of a crouched predator. The hard, flat look that came around his eyes when he was irritated or angry was accentuated a hundred-fold, leaving the skin stretched too tightly over his bones, his mouth a thin, straight line. His eyes burned like live coals.

Her captor began waving the knife, taunting, making the same kind of threats Samuels had about what he was going to do to a

“Injun’s whore.” He pressed the knife blade against Anne’s mouth, then waved it to the side as if to make sure it could be seen, did the same thing on one side of her face, then the other. The third time he stretched his arm to the side, waving the knife, Cord’s arm blurred with motion.

Anne never saw Cord’s knife in his hand or in the air, only heard the thump as it buried itself in the fleshy part of the big man’s forearm. The force was so great his arm thudded back against the wooden front of the store behind him, held there by the blade through his muscle embedded in the wood. He began screaming and loosened his grip on Anne. She stamped on his booted foot as hard as she could, twisted away and ran towards Cord.

As she ran, she heard Cord, yell, “Ephraim!” And suddenly Ephraim had her by the arm and was pulling her away, pulling her into the middle of the whole Bennett family.

Anne turned back and saw the two strangers who weren’t wounded, stepping into the street, putting distance between themselves so that they could come at Cord from opposite sides.

Pulling against Ephraim’s tight grip on her wrist, she tried to get away from him, desperate to get to Cord or to get his damned family to help him. “*Shoot* them!” she begged. “Do something! Don’t just stand here. Help him!”

None of the Bennetts seemed even concerned. Frank said, “I sent Gil and Martin back to Eph’s for guns. Calm down, Anne. You don’t need to worry about him.”

Frank moved behind Luke and Pete, who were watching what was happening in the street avidly, and said, “Listen you two. You can watch what happens with one eye but start right now searching the crowd with the other. This is a setup if I ever saw one. Look for another stranger. When we find him, we make sure there’s no backshooting.”

Backshooting! Anne started to scan the crowd herself, then gasped as she saw that the two men were closing in on Cord in the street. He didn’t wait for them. He charged the man on his left. Knowing she couldn’t help him herself in this kind of fight, Anne stopped pulling against Ephraim’s hold. Although the other men both had an advantage in height and weight, she could see that Cord was much faster and much more agile.

Behind her she heard Gil and Martin’s voices and knew the men were all arming themselves. She glanced around for a second and saw Luke and Pete moving through the crowd with purpose but wasn’t willing to take her eyes off Cord long enough to see where they went.

Both heavier men wanted to close in on Cord, but the best they

could do were occasional glancing blows. He used feet, fists, and open hands in strange ways. When he slammed both knees into one opponent's chest, the force of the blow took the man out of the fight long enough for Cord to concentrate on the second man with devastating effect.

The man fell with one leg angled between the road and the sidewalk, and Cord launched himself at the barely rising, winded first opponent off the second man's knee. The leg bent backward as it was never meant to do with sickening popping noises. A chilling wail rent the air, falling to a thin moan that provided background for the rest of the fight.

The man who had started it all had freed his arm and was wrapping it with a dirty handkerchief. Anne watched Frank walk over to him, thinking he was going to keep the man out of the fight, but Frank just picked up both knives. He grinned cheerfully at the brute and said, "If you want to let my brother cripple you, go right ahead, but I'll keep these."

The big man growled, "I'm going to smash that damn Injun to pieces. You watch."

Frank tipped his hat, "Yeah, sure you are."

Anne couldn't believe what she was seeing and hearing. What was the *matter* with these people?

The monster was barely off the sidewalk before the second of his friends was out of the fight for good. He went down again with the breath knocked out of him. This time several hammer like blows of his elbow against the rock-hard clay road surface produced the same heart-stopping wail his friend had made - until he passed out.

Cord rolled out of the way barely in time to avoid the kick the third man aimed at him. The two men circled slowly, the difference in size making a David and Goliath picture.

Anne had all but given up thoughts of getting out of Ephraim's grip. Now she heard Noah Reynolds' voice, "You fellas got any idea how we're going to stop him?"

Frank was standing beside her now. He said, "The only way is with a rifle, I guess. He'll still be beating on the poor fool an hour after he's just meat if we don't."

"It's dangerous."

"Yeah, I don't like it much either, but it's the only way without taking a chance of getting killed ourselves. I'll do it."

Anne listened with disbelief, never taking her eyes off what was happening in the street. She saw the third man almost falling steadily backward, Cord driving him back with vicious, cracking blows. He seemed to recover and smashed Cord twice, once in the body and once in the face, throwing him through the air and

slamming him on his back, but when the huge man tried to close again, Cord's boots jabbed into his midsection and rolled him in a crashing somersault. Then it was all over, Cord on his knees rocking the man with blow after blow.

The men behind her were quiet now. Anne took a quick look over her shoulder and panicked at the sight of Frank hefting his rifle thoughtfully. If she couldn't pull out of Ephraim's grip, there were other ways. She pivoted to face him and brought her knee smartly into his groin. He released her wrist and doubled over towards her with a strangled sound.

Anne turned and ran, crying, "Cord, Cord."

She ran to him and grabbed him by the arm, pulling and gasping. "Stop, stop. They're going to shoot you."

Cord came to his feet as if she were another enemy, one fist still pulled back, then recognized her. "What the hell are you doing here?"

Without waiting for an answer he took her upper arm in a vise-like grip and marched back to the Bennetts.

"What the hell's the matter with you, Eph? You too old, too slow, and too soft to keep hold of one damn woman for the space of a fight? I'm taking her down to your place to clean up."

Anne noted with satisfaction that Ephraim was only just barely standing upright again and not capable of a reply, but Cord had a harder hold on her now than his brother had had. He shoved her up the street toward the house. She struggled against his unrelenting grasp.

"Let go of my arm. You're hurting me."

There was no answer. He kept right on walking.

"Cord, you're hurting my arm. Let go."

Still no answer. Furious, she stopped walking and braced her whole body, digging in and absolutely opposing his forward push. He could either drag her off her feet or stop. He stopped.

"You can either drag me or you can let go of my arm and *ask*, and I'll go anywhere you want."

Cord did look like the devil some called him. One eye was beginning to blacken and swell. There were thin lines of blood from each nostril and one side of his mouth, and his cheek had split again right where Anne had sewed it the previous October. For the first time she could understand someone describing his eyes as wolf-like.

Cord glared back at her for several seconds and then let go of her arm. "Get your ass down the street to Ephraim's *please*."

Chin in the air, she turned and went. Cord followed, and she was aware of the rest of his family and her own mother behind him because she could hear the murmur of their voices.

At Ephraim's house, Cord walked right in and kept going through the kitchen towards the back of the house.

"Where are you going?" Anne asked.

"There's mirrors and stuff in the spare bedroom. I'll get Martha to bring you what you need."

Anne stopped in the middle of the parlor. "What I need is to go home right now. I don't want anything from Martha or any of the rest of them. They were going to shoot you."

"No, they weren't."

His attitude was the last straw. Anne lost the last shreds of control.

"All right, don't believe me! It must be terrible to think you're married to a dim-witted liar. I'm telling you I heard them talking about shooting you just to keep you from beating on that disgusting piece of filth in the street. But of course your faith in your damn family is complete. Since we've been married not one of them has ever said a kind word to you or about you. They just stood there and didn't even try to help, but they wouldn't hurt you would they? Why waste your life being married to me? Living with me? Why don't you move back to the big house so you can be close to your precious, damn, useless family? Why not move here? Why n…."

He cut her off with his hand across her mouth and held her pressed against him with one hand in the small of her back and the other across her mouth. Anne only struggled briefly before giving in to his superior strength and standing quietly, smoldering.

He spoke very softly. "Suppose you take a deep breath and count to ten and listen to me. It's not that I don't believe you. I believe you heard something that you thought meant they were going to shoot me, but I know that's not what they were going to do. They wanted to stop me because they've got it in their heads once I start beating on a man I won't stop till after he's long dead, and they think if I beat a man to death in front of the whole town, I'll hang. Not much sense saving me from a hanging by shooting me, is there? Now think hard, exactly who said what? Try to remember the exact words." He removed his hand.

Anne was in control again. She very carefully related exactly what had been said.

"Yeah, well, when they said use a rifle, they meant clubbing me with it, not shooting me."

"But they could kill you that way too!"

"Mm. Less likely."

"Why do they think you'd kill that man after he was unconscious?"

"Well, there was Hatch, and then a while back I jumped

somebody pretty bad, and Frank got in the way. I was choking Frank a bit, and Eph clubbed me off. They think I'd have killed Frank and the man I started on."

"Was that Boggs?"

"Yeah."

With all her anger gone, there was nothing left but the fear. Anne buried her head against his chest. "I'm sorry, screeching at you like that in front of everybody. I was so afraid, and then you were mad at *me*."

"Annie, I was mad because you could have gotten hurt. If I hit you accidentally I could break your jaw - or your neck. It scared hell out of me to have you run out there like that. Don't cry. Come on, don't cry."

"I'm not crying."

"Yes, you are."

His mouth was against her temple, tracing her cheekbone, sipping the tears from her eyes. He kissed gently across her cheeks, along her jaw, down her throat. Anne stopped sobbing. She took a deep shuddering breath, whispered, "That's nice."

From the kitchen, Anne heard her mother's raised voice. "I don't care. That's my daughter!"

Cord pulled away from her so fast he was almost across the room by the time Leona hurried into the parlor. As he disappeared toward the kitchen, Anne glared at her mother. The only reason the Bennetts were worse than her own family was that there were more of them.

CORD WALKED INTO THE KITCHEN to find his whole family sitting around the big table, as was Rob Wells. Frank was the only one who would even look at him, although the look was a single disgusted glance. Every member of the family had interpreted Anne's sudden silence in the same way, he realized.

Oh, hell, what did it matter? "Martha, would you take some water to Anne? She's got blood on her face."

Martha didn't waste her scorn, merely dipped water into a basin and left. Cord dropped into one of the kitchen chairs, suddenly feeling very tired and hurting worse - and in more ways - than he wanted to think about. No one said a word. No one seemed to move.

After long, uncomfortable minutes, the women returned. Leona, slightly shame-faced, went to sit next to Rob. Martha set the basin of blood-stained water next to the stove with a thump, and Anne, hair redone, face unmarked, and with a look on her face that didn't bode well for the Bennetts, faced Ephraim and Frank.

"I apologize for most of the terrible things I know you could

hear me say about you. Cord explained you didn't mean you were going to shoot him, but hitting him with a rifle isn't a whole lot better. If this ever happens again, you need to leave him alone."

Having gotten everyone's attention with this remarkable non-apology, Anne turned to Ephraim and added, "And Ephraim I'm sorry if I hurt you, but you wouldn't let go, and I had to get loose. I didn't use all my strength and put my full weight behind it the way he said to. Still, I know it wasn't very nice, and I'm sorry."

Suddenly Cord realized he was the only one who hadn't known how Anne got away from Ephraim, but her apology spelled it out for him and lifted his mood. "You mean you kneed Eph in the privates?"

"I only gave him a little tap. To make him let go. It really did work a treat, just like you said it would." Anne grinned at him, not really the slightest bit sorry, then continued. "I've been thinking. None of the rest of you are willing to shoot men like that, but I could. They attacked me, and if I shot them nobody would think it was wrong. Maybe I should have a gun of my own. I could…."

That was as far as she got before Ephraim was on his feet, gentle Ephraim, quiet Ephraim, bellowing as loud as Frank ever had.

"So you taught her that cute trick, brother? I should have known. By all means, get her a gun of her own. Make sure you get something with grips she can cut notches in. Better yet, have the thing engraved. On one side they can put 'Ephraim' and on the other side they can put 'Frank.' That woman's a menace. She was probably dangerous even before you started 'educating' her. Buy her a gun! Buy her a knife! One thing I've got to admit, little brother, if you're brave enough to sleep under the same roof as that woman, much less in the same bed, you deserve a goddamn medal!"

Cord couldn't remember seeing Eph in such a rage, and couldn't resist making it worse. "A 'little tap' in the stones sure makes you cranky, Eph."

He got the tone just right, and could actually see Ephraim's chest expand with the deep breath he took to sustain the next roar. He was forestalled, however, by a knock on the door. Luke, leaning against the wall next to the door, just swung it open, too engrossed in this entertainment to shift his eyes.

It was Noah Reynolds who walked in. Without being invited, Noah sat across from Cord. "Looks like the poor bastards actually hit you once or twice."

Cord reached over to Frank's shirt pocket and helped himself to one of the little black cigars, lighting it before raising his head. "You here to arrest me?"

"No. Hard as it is to believe half a dozen people came up to me

to make sure I understood you were provoked. Any man should defend his wife under such circumstances they told me. Of course it didn't really have anything to do with Anne, did it? You know those men?"

"No."

Frank said, "It was a setup, Noah. There was a gunnie in the crowd."

"You sure?"

"I'm sure, but I can't prove it. The boys got behind him and let him know they were there, so he never made a move."

"Well, I got a false complaint this morning that got me out to the south edge of town, so I'd say you're right. Of course, it's not like a gentle soul like Cord here would have any enemies who'd want to spit on his grave."

Noah turned back to Cord then. "You know, after that week you spent in my jail I had a nightmare from time to time. Nothing to it but your eyes looking at me out of the dark, and I'd wake up in a sweat from head to toe. Didn't happen all that often, maybe once a year, but you know when it stopped? It stopped the day I realized I didn't need to worry about ever trying to arrest you. The day ever comes you need arresting, I'm just going to throw the badge down on the desk and walk out. When I decided that, that nightmare never came again."

"Sorry you feel that way," Cord said. "I always figured I owe you."

"It's what you figure you owe me that scares me. I come from Doc Craig's. He says that one man, he's just got to decide the best position for that arm to be in for the rest of his life. That elbow's going to heal solid and never bend again, so the way he sets it is the way it's going to be.

"Now the one with the smashed knee, he's better off. The knee won't bend much either, but he'll be able to get around with a stick. Of course, the third one, he's downright lucky. If his jaw heals a little crooked, so what. He wasn't pretty to start with, and he'll probably be able to chew again eventually. He'll just lose a lot of weight the next eight weeks or so while he heals up."

Cord shrugged, smoke surrounding his words. "They should have kept their hands off my wife."

Noah shook his head. "We all know it wouldn't have mattered any how they started it. You'd have finished it the same way. Tell me, you got some theory it isn't enough to whup a man, you got to kill or cripple anybody fool enough to fight you?"

"I guess it's a theory. A man I 'just whupped' down in Texas shot me in the back the next day. Gave me a notion if I have to fight

I might as well make sure it's only once."

"You're still alive. What happened to the backshooter?"

"He isn't."

"Don't surprise me somehow. How many in that five years?"

"Four. Of course, since only white men count, I guess you'd say two."

"Four." Although he'd asked, the answer made Noah stiffen. "I never saw anything. Never saw a poster or anything."

"You're assuming. No one thought posters were called for."

"I heard one thing I thought was you. It was from a lawman who was there when they hung Jack Hatch. He said Jack was taking it real well, acting brave and putting on a good show. A lot of folks were saying how they shouldn't hang a man like that over a prostitute. Then when he got to the foot of the gallows stairs, he went crazy. They had to drag him up the steps. This marshal, he told me Jack was screaming the devil come to get him. You happen to be there when they hung Jack Hatch?"

"Yeah. Your friend had it close."

Noah stood and stared at Cord for a long moment. "You know I've been lawing for almost thirty years, and I've known quite a few men who scared me, gunmen mostly. But in all the years I've never known anybody scared me like you do."

Noah didn't waste time with social niceties with the rest of the family after that, just replaced his hat and walked out.

Anne was still on emotional edge, and she had had quite enough of the Bennetts and for that matter of the sheriff. "I wonder what he thinks you should have done - tied a bow around me and let them have me? Or maybe they'd have let me go if you'd just said please in the right tone of voice?"

She got to her feet expecting Cord to get up too. "We'd better get to Dr. Craig's ourselves. You need stitches again, and you're sitting exactly the way you did last fall when your ribs were bothering you."

Cord didn't move. "Bet Craig's kind of busy right now. How about you stitch it up when we get home?"

"We're two hours from home, and I retched and cried the whole time I did it when you were unconscious, and I put in crooked stitches. Surely Dr. Craig can leave those criminals long enough to put a few stitches in your cheek and strap your ribs."

Martha said, "If Anne doesn't want to stitch it, I will. You're right, Dr. Craig will have other things to tend to right now. Judith, suppose you and Beth start setting the table for dinner. Put in the extra leaf and fix extra places. Leona, can you and Rob stay?"

Leona still looked slightly embarrassed. "No, I'd better get home

and get Edward's dinner. Thank you, Martha. Anne,…"

Anne had also had quite enough of her mother and brother. "I'll see you next week, Mother," she said sharply.

Martha refilled the basin with warm water and put it and soap in front of Cord. "Wash up and clean that cut out thoroughly. I'll get a needle and thread."

Martha closed the cut with four neat stitches. "Your shirt looks ruined. Take it off and you can borrow one of Pete's to wear home."

He removed his shirt, and Anne examined it sadly. "I don't have any more of this cream-colored material. I'll have to make you a plain white one."

She got a good look at him before he managed to get Pete's shirt on. "Oh, no, you don't. Look at you. You need your ribs strapped."

"My ribs are fine. I'll be a little sore tomorrow is all."

She opened her mouth to argue further, and he cut her off. "Annie, we're sitting in a room full of people afraid to open their mouths for fear I'll go berserk and cut them to pieces, and the sheriff of the damn town thinks I make John Wesley Hardin look like a saint. Are you going to keep sassing me about my ribs?"

He put the shirt on, growling at her, but his eyes were laughing.

"Dr. Craig says you're the only patient he ever treated who kept saying nothing hurt when he examined you right until you passed out. You think I *believe* your ribs are all right?"

"Ti-gress, if you don't slow down, I'm going to leave you here and Ephraim can keep you in *his* root cellar."

Tigress. Not only did she like it, she liked the way he said it, as if it were two distinct words. "You have already noted yourself that your brother is too old and too slow to keep a hold of me."

Ephraim muttered, "I'd sooner kiss a rattlesnake than hold you again."

She thought she saw a slight quirk at one corner of Cord's mouth for a second. He said, "You're telling me I'm stuck with you because I'm the only one tough enough?"

"Well, you are most definitely stuck with me."

There was no conversation through dinner except of the please pass the potatoes type. Frank handed over Cord's knife without comment when asked and also made no reply to the brief thanks for stopping the fourth man.

When Anne tried to help with the dishes, Martha shooed her away. "Don't worry a minute. I know you're worn out and want to get home, and we'd all just get in each other's way. I also think you have a standing invitation to Sunday dinner with the family from now on. At least I think the reason we couldn't invite you before has

taken care of itself."

Martha gave her son a hard eye. Pete looked a little embarrassed.

"Ah, Ma," he said, "I guess I've got enough sense not to try to wrassle a grizzly once somebody's proved it's a grizzly."

"Luke?"

Luke gave Cord a cocky, unrepentant grin. "I've decided to wait a while, Aunt Martha, like ten years, maybe even twenty."

"Cord?"

"We'll see, Marty."

Anne couldn't get out of that house fast enough.

AFTER CORD AND ANNE LEFT, Martha turned to find every eye in the room on her.

"What in heaven's name has gotten into you?" Ephraim said. "He's abusing that incredible woman right in our own house, and you're stitching him up and giving them a standing invitation for Sunday dinner?"

"He didn't abuse her, dear."

"Maybe nothing showed, that was bloody water you brought back. She probably bled from her nose or mouth."

"She didn't bleed at all. It was his blood."

"How could it be his blood?"

"I didn't ask, but she certainly lit into her mother for thinking he hurt her. My guess would be he kissed her. It's one of the best ways to quiet us women down, you know."

Frank's face set in hard lines. "Cord *kiss* her?" he said. "Martha, you've taken leave of your senses."

Martha pressed her lips together for a moment, then said, "Frank, you're the one who goes on about the carnal aspects of their marriage. Are you claiming now you think he never touches her?"

Frank pushed back his chair and headed for the parlor and an after-dinner cigar. "What I think is that Cord's mean as a snake, and any touching he does has nothing to do with kissing."

Once the men were gone, Martha stopped holding her feelings in and began laughing.

Judith's incredulous look only made her laugh harder.

* * *

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Chapter 23

ON THE WAY OUT OF town, Cord stopped the buggy in front of the sheriff's office. "If I were to go have a talk with Noah for a few minutes would you stay here?

"Yes."

He looked up and down the empty Sunday afternoon street. "And if you saw anybody coming who wasn't obviously friendly, would you jump down and come inside?"

"Yes."

"And if somebody surprised you would you yell?"

"A first-class lady in distress scream."

"The rifle's under the seat…."

"Cord, stop fretting. I *promise*. A stranger appears, I'll whisk inside. Somebody drops from a rooftop and grabs me, I'll scream first and shoot second. I promise."

"All right. I won't be long."

Noah was sitting reading some sort of poster when Cord walked in. He watched with regret as the older man's face paled, then he lowered himself into one of the chairs in front of the sheriff's desk quickly, hoping to look as non-threatening as possible.

"I suppose I should have kept my mouth shut today," Noah said.

"Wish you'd said something years ago. When I said I figure I owe you, I meant it in the ordinary way. Even after the Hatch business, Frank and Eph would never have brought themselves to tell me what you did back then, and I needed to know it. Kept me alive a few times since."

For a few seconds, Noah's mouth worked, no words coming. In the end, he managed, "I've never noticed you taking any of that advice."

"I'm not much good at that scraping and bowing stuff. Works out that most people take one look and decide to leave me be as long as I don't push, and I don't push."

"All right, I'll give you that. You don't push."

"Since we're having this little talk, Noah, tell me something I've wondered about over the years. You ever sorry you pulled me off Hatch?"

Noah finally relaxed, letting the paper in his hands fall on the desk, and leaning back in his chair. "That's a hard question. Yes, I guess I've been sorry. There were three other girls in this area, you know. Three dead ones, that is, that I always thought were Jack. Then there was the Peabody girl. She's a woman now and she's

never said a word after what happened to her, just sits there in a chair in her folks' house and stares at the wall."

"I never knew that," Cord said.

"Yeah, well." Noah shook his head. "I heard there were a couple of others in Utah they thought were Jack, even though they only had a witness for the one they hung him for. But the fact is I didn't know all that the night I arrested you. I'd have let you kill him just over what I could see he did to Marie if it was up to me, but that's not the way it works, and you sure can't wish it. They wouldn't have hung you, you know. They'd of thrown you in jail and thrown away the key. If I had to choose between twenty years in prison and hanging, I'd choose hanging myself."

"Maybe you're right."

"You know I am. I talked to Anne about bringing charges against Samuels. You know how it is."

Cord felt a surge of the old anger. "Yeah. Nobody'd convict him of anything when they found her with me."

"It surprised me you didn't try to go after them."

"Never crossed my mind till you mentioned it that day at the cafe. Shooting Meeks and Samuels kind of let off a lot of steam, and I guess I have it in my mind they did me a favor in the long run."

"A favor, huh." Noah said, shaking his head. "Well, if we're answering touchy questions, I'd be interested in knowing what happened out there. How'd you two end up staying together?"

Cord considered telling Noah it was none of his business - or walking out. But Noah had not only helped him those many years ago, he had given Anne help and comfort when she needed it, and he'd come here to make peace with the sheriff. So after a pause he answered. "Guess you could say I took advantage. She didn't want to ask Frank and Eph for help, and I didn't try very hard to talk her into it."

"And her?"

"I don't know. I think she needs - some time to heal and kind of gather herself before she goes on."

"You mean you think it's temporary?"

"You think a woman like that's going to live the rest of her life with me?"

"I wouldn't have thought a woman like that would walk in your house to start with, or weep over you when you looked worse than any piece of meat I've ever et, or stay five minutes after you could get around. I wouldn't have thought she could run Frank off with a gun, or double Eph over with her knee, so I don't think my opinion on the subject is worth much."

"Maybe not." Cord rose and headed for the door. "And I guess

I'd better get back out there, or she'll get riled and drive off without me."

"You want me to let you know if any of those men show up in these wanted posters?"

Cord tugged his hat lower over his eyes before he answered. "Sheriffing's your job, Noah. I got all I can handle just being the meanest son of a bitch in the world."

NOAH HAD LAUGHED OUT LOUD after Cord left his office. Everything that happened that day made him more determined than ever to keep any of the controversy swirling around town about Cord and Anne from breaking out in more violence.

As he made his rounds through the town, Noah stopped and corrected the most flagrant and ridiculous misconceptions about the couple, but he feared he was making no dent in public opinion. His idea that having them come to church would calm the talk wasn't working either, and it worried him.

One night in Thomas White's saloon, Noah had another thought. So instead of just telling a group of card players who were kicking around a version of the root cellar theory that they were wrong, Noah sat down at their table and told them the whole story.

His listeners were, of course, dubious. They argued and tried to poke holes in the story until one said, "You saying Tom was there? Maybe we ought to ask him."

"He wouldn't say a word about it to me, but maybe you ought to try him."

They did, and White's guilty refusal to discuss the matter confirmed the sheriff's tale. He left a thoughtful group of poker players sitting at their table.

The next day Noah visited both Daniel Craig and James Miles. He proposed to both men that they begin to spread the truth around whenever the opportunity arose - for Anne's sake. To his surprise, both agreed it was a good idea and both made it clear they were willing to help not just for Anne's sake, but also for Cord's.

As Craig explained to Noah, "You know I never even met him until I treated him last fall, but I saw enough of him then to get to know him a little, and I like him. What's more I have known Anne for a long time, and there's no doubt in my mind he's far better to her than anybody guesses. She's happier than I've ever seen her."

"Didn't the mess he made of those three men last week bother you, Doc?"

"Those men were scum. They meant to kill him, and it's hard to get upset about a few broken bones on their kind. It will probably keep them from killing somebody else on down the road."

James Miles said more or less the same thing. “Sure I’ll tell anybody I can. I don’t know why I haven’t before. Anne looks happier every time she walks in here. I wish my Rachel was doing half as well.”

So the three men began telling the whole story at every opportunity, and to Noah’s relief, they began to have an effect on opinion in the town. It helped that Dick Brown, who had ridden away, was quite willing to admit what he had seen and heard before he left. Michael Benton, riddled with guilt, also confessed to what he had seen, although Noah noticed Benton’s story was light on admitting what he had *done*.

George Detrick, finally realizing that by being too quick to judge he had missed his opportunity to get his hands on the woman he had wanted so much, got maudlinly drunk one night and not only confirmed the story, but made it only too clear to anyone listening what had been done in the attempt to force Anne to marry him. And he left little doubt what her life would have been like if the attempt had succeeded.

“That uppity bitch thought she was too good for me, but I’d have had her shaped up before the first week passed. That kind just needs a few hard whollops to teach them proper respect is all.”

In the end the sheriff decided his campaign to quiet the building outrage in the town had been pretty successful.

Edward Wells was one person the sheriff’s campaign only made angrier. The more people questioned his treatment of his daughter, the more Edward’s obsession with erasing the disgrace he believed Anne had brought on his family grew. On the surface he remained calm, repeating his standard answer to the criticism until he was gritting his teeth.

“I’m sorry about all of it, although you’ve heard some real exaggerations. The Double M hands just got carried away.”

As far as Edward was concerned, the only possible resolution to the situation was to get Anne away from Cord. It did nothing for his state of mind that his first attempt to do just that had been a singular failure.

The gunman who had been in the crowd watching the fight was named Ike Handler. Handler had been recommended to Edward as someone who could arrange what he wanted - Cord Bennett dead and Anne safely locked up at home again. Edward had paid the gunman three hundred dollars and agreed to pay seven hundred more when the job was done.

Now Edward had no intention paying Handler the balance of the money for the botched job, but he expected the man to be willing to make a second try in order to get it. As agreed, Edward

and Rob met with the man the night after the fight in the back of the shop.

Handler did expect more money, but not for finishing the job. “You’re the one who told me the ‘breed would be alone. You said nobody would back him up or care what happened, and that ain’t the way it was. Them boys, his nephews, I guess, had me dead to rights, and they let me know it. Another two hundred and we’ll call it even.”

Edward was only too aware what had gone wrong with what had seemed like a good plan, but didn’t consider it his own fault. “You said you could get the job done, and you didn’t. I don’t need excuses. You didn’t earn it, and I’m not paying it. Maybe if you have another way to get the job done, we could negotiate.”

“Not me,” Handler said. “Try it again and the law won’t believe I shot him because I was afraid for my men. If I was you, I wouldn’t go straight at it next time. Maybe there’s some way to make the Injun believe your daughter just run off. That’s what I’d do.”

After seeing Handler and another hundred dollars out of the shop, Rob, who had been apologizing almost non-stop since the fight, started in again. “I’m sorry, Father. Honestly, they all act as if they wouldn’t give him water in the desert, and it’s not like they jumped into the street to help him. Anne’s in a snit over that. I didn’t think they’d….”

Edward cut him off. He didn’t want to hear any more excuses from his son either. “Enough. Just be more careful in the future. It wouldn’t be so bad if it weren’t for the time factor. It’s amazing he hasn’t started his bastard growing in her yet.”

Rob cleared his throat and shifted nervously. Edward noticed immediately and barked, “What is it? Spit it out.”

Rob avoided his eyes. “I’m not sure it’s true. Nancy Lee heard it from some of the other women and supposedly it was Mrs. Craig who started the talk, but, well.”

Edward frowned at his son impatiently until he went on. “They say there won’t be any children - some of the damage from that beating - you know.”

Edward smiled in satisfaction. Good news at last. “Well, well, well, maybe Meeks did something worthwhile after all. In that case we’ll just take the time to plan carefully and come up with something guaranteed to work.”

Rob also smiled, trying to share his father’s pleasure over this tidbit, trying to ignore the crawling feeling in the pit of his stomach. His father’s ready acceptance of this information meant Edward had indeed condoned the inhumane damage done to a man who had committed no wrong, who was under guns, held down, and unable

to fight back.

* * *

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Chapter 24

THE MEMORY OF THE WAY Cord had kissed her after the fight left Anne hoping for more kisses, more caresses, but as the days passed with no change, she resigned herself to things continuing as they had been.

So more than a week later, when she felt the unexpected warmth of him pressed close behind her as she worked in the barn, her first reaction was surprise. His hands slipped along her ribs, cupped her breasts, pulled her back against him. His cheek was against her hair, his lips gently nuzzling below her ear and down her neck. She turned in his arms, surprise turning to delight as she realized his intentions.

He searched her face intently, as if trying to find the answer to some terribly important question.

"Cord?"

Anne got no further before his mouth met hers in a careful, exploratory kiss. They had been married six months, and it was the first time he really kissed her. Hope and anticipation began to take wing in her heart as he led her around the stall partition and guided her down on clean straw.

Cord was above her, the intent questioning look still in his eyes when a movement distracted her. With horror she saw a fat brown spider only a foot away, bumbling across the straw straight for her.

She reacted the way she had reacted all her life, crazy with unreasoning fear, pushing against his chest and almost sobbing, "Let me up! Let me go!"

By the time she got to her feet Cord was gone, but in her panic she didn't even notice until she checked her clothes and hair carefully, shaking with the after effects of her fear. Beginning to calm down, she looked around in wonder. Where could he have gone so fast?

Cord had started immediately for the corralled horses with every intention of saddling the first one he caught and riding off. He was slowed by a wave of sickness so powerful it left him holding the fence for support.

This was much worse than anything he had even worried about. Crazed fear and revulsion had exploded from her. How could she have hidden feelings like that in the night? How was he ever going to face her again? It was over as of now. Everything was over. He didn't hear her walk up behind him.

"Cord, I'm sorry, I…."

Her voice steadied him and he turned and strode away. She

followed after him, catching up again as he opened the corral gate.

"Will you let me explain? It was just…."

Rigid with his own violent emotions, without turning around he snarled, "You don't have to explain. You don't want me taking you in the barn. You don't want *me* any time any place, and you don't have to worry about it again."

He kept his back to her, caught one of the three-year-olds and started saddling it without even brushing the dust off its back. Anne walked up close behind him.

"Turn around and listen to me."

He finished tightening the cinch and tying it off.

"Please, turn around and let me explain."

He removed the bridle from where it hung on the saddle horn and reached for the buckle on the halter, then stumbled into the horse as Anne's full weight hit him in the back. She started pounding him between the shoulder blades, yelling, "Turn around, damn you!"

As the horse sidled away nervously, still under the tattoo of blows, Cord caught his balance and turned on her. He caught her wrists, forcing her arms behind her and threw her back against the corral fence, pinning her with his hips. It was as close as he would ever come to hitting a woman, and she should have been afraid.

Instead Anne gave him her sweetest smile. "Well, now that I've got your attention, will you listen? It was a spider."

Cord had expected excuses. I'm sorry. It won't happen again. I don't know what came over me. It isn't proper in daylight. He felt like shaking his head to clear it. The gray eyes inches from his own were wide and clear.

Anne looked as if she thought those two words fixed everything. A spider. Somehow he unclenched his jaw muscles enough to force speech. "You're telling me there was a spider in that stall and it scared you."

"Yes, that's what I'm telling you, and if you hadn't disappeared like that you could have killed it or something and you could have helped me make sure nothing crawly was on me. What on earth is the matter with you?"

With a quiver he felt himself drawing back from some emotional abyss deep within. He let go of her wrists and stopped crushing her against the fence but didn't back off. "How big was this spider?"

Her eyes dropped and he saw the evasive look. She looked up at him again and began to turn slightly pink. Finally, with a sigh, Anne marked off the length of the nail on her thumb.

At first he thought she was going to lie, but then he realized she

was embarrassed. She crossed her arms defensively under her breasts.

"A spider the size of your fingernail had you in a screaming panic?"

"I know it's stupid. I've been hearing how stupid it is all my life. I can't help it." Anne wouldn't meet his eyes now.

"Mm. What else are you afraid of?"

"Look, Cord, this isn't funny. If you were to bring one of those things in the house and try to tease me with it or something, we'd never be friends again."

Friends again. He swallowed hard. "I'm not going to tease you. What else are you afraid of?"

"Almost anything crawly. Other bugs. Snakes, lizards, frogs."

"Guess I better never tell Ephraim."

Anne's eyes flew up then, and she put one hand on his shoulder, tentatively. He bent to her mouth slowly, eyes never leaving hers, giving her all the time and every opportunity to change her mind, object in any way. As his lips touched hers she slid both arms around his neck, arching against him. He pulled her harder against him, pushing one thigh between hers. He slid his tongue slowly along the inner surfaces of her lips, inquisitive, tasting.

As he began to deepen the kiss she responded hungrily, caressing his tongue with her own, arching into him.

Cord ended the kiss as he had begun it, searching her face, reading the emotions so plain to see there. He ran a thumb lightly across her jaw. "Now that I've saddled him, I'd better ride him."

"We could go to the house."

"Not now. I'll see you later."

Cord rode away because he was still too near the edge of the abyss. He needed to get away, to be alone to sort out the swirling emotions and regain his shredded control. He rode the colt to one of his favorite spots in the hills. From here he could see the ranch buildings far below, looking like a child's toys. He could detect no movement, no sign of Anne in the yard.

The sky was a clear azure today, the new spring grass studded with wildflowers. Here and there a lone pine moved slightly in the southerly breeze. The peace of the place began to seep slowly through him, easing the raging conflicts. He studied the faraway buildings, the pastures, the sky, deliberately looking only outwards, not inwards.

It was some time before he was ready to face himself, but he came to it. He was in love with his wife - probably had been half in love with her since the first day he met her. He admitted it to himself and examined the idea carefully. It seemed, in the end, it

didn't really make much difference.

From the beginning he had known that there would be a heavy price to pay for having her, for whatever time he was given. Admitting love did not change that. The pain of loss lurked in the future. It would be his and he would have to bear it in whatever way he could when the time came.

But what difference did it make now - in the weeks, months, even a year she might stay? If she knew that his world was alive and full of light with her in it, half-dead and dreary without her, she might stay even when she no longer wanted to. He did not want to trap her, cage her when she was ready to go.

He had hoped that she might accept his touch, but had never believed she might return his kiss or show the beginnings of passion. Now there was no way he would not try to steal a little more of something he never expected to have.

Cord had spent a lifetime hiding feelings. Surely he could let go a little, love her a little, and keep her from recognizing anything but lust. Maybe it would even be possible in whatever time there was to store up enough memories to help him through the lonely years to come.

With a sigh he let his restless, impatient colt head for home.

FACE WET WITH TEARS, FEELING thoroughly rejected, Anne dragged herself into the house and curled up in the rocking chair. How could he kiss her like that and just ride off? That kiss had made her lose all sense of time and place, feel like the fluffy seed of the cottonwood trees, floating above the ground with no direction or substance.

How could he?

All cried out, she began to reconsider the afternoon's events. She thought of the words Cord had hurled at her in anger, and gradually she realized he had not been angry, but hurt.

The idea was so strange, so foreign to her concept of what men were like, she could not accept it at first. Little by little she began to see that if he believed his own words it explained many of his actions. But how could he believe such a thing? From the beginning she wanted more, not less, of him in every way.

It doesn't matter, whispered an inner voice, he still believes someday you'll just get tired of this life and walk away. You know that. Why shouldn't he believe all sorts of other things that aren't true?

She looked around the cheerful little house she loved so much. Six months she thought. It's been just six months, and we've already come so far. Two people who barely knew each other thrown

together in violence and ugliness.

She sighed, a deep shaky breath. Leave him alone her inner voice said. Give him room, give him time. Words won't change his mind about this any more than about your leaving. He has to come to it all by himself.

Cord didn't return until almost time for evening chores, and it seemed he had decided to pretend nothing had happened, to revert to the way things had been. I can stand it for a while, she thought, not for long, but for a while.

Only a few days passed, however, before Anne looked up from preparing lunch to see him standing watching her with such a look of naked desire her stomach did a gentle flip. She smiled uncertainly at him.

"Do you know that every time you look at me like that you erase the hurt of at least a hundred times someone said I wasn't ladylike enough? You make me feel so - female. I think to myself that must be the way a hungry wolf looks at a lamb."

He moved then, walked to her. She found herself thinking maybe topaz, maybe his eyes are like smoked topaz. This kiss was not tentative, but sure and certain. For months she had dreamed of kisses, but the sensual magic of the firm lips was sweeter than anything she had known to dream about.

All her senses were already on fire as his tongue teased and tasted. His hands cupped her buttocks, pulling her against his groin so that she felt the effect of her body on his. She arched into him, trying to relieve the ache in her breasts and nipples by pressing them into the solid muscles of his chest.

As Anne sagged back against the edge of the work table, he lifted her, and instinctively her legs locked around his hips, her hands went first to his waist, then his ribs, then his back, feeling the sinewy ripple of muscle as he moved.

He kissed his way slowly down her throat. Soft whimpers of pleasure began to vibrate from her with each breath. He unbuttoned first her blouse, then the front of her cotton undervest, freeing a breast and rubbing the nipple with one thumb, kissing the upper surface, then beginning to taste his way back across her collarbone ever upwards.

She could barely moan words. "Please, I never meant, never meant you shouldn't, please…."

Glittering eyes met hers for a moment before he cut her off again with his mouth. He kissed her until she was floating, wondering if she would faint for lack of breath, then pulled away and fastened on the exposed nipple. The instant of pleasurable sensation she remembered was nothing compared to this. As his

tongue circled the already erect tip, fiery quivers raced outwards. All her insides were turning to molten liquid. The need for him was a throbbing void between her thighs.

Anne undid his belt, freed him. The feel of his erect organ pressed against a thigh or her stomach in the darkness was familiar, but now her tentative fingers explored the hot, pulsating length. She scooted forward, arched against him, but was thwarted by her own undergarments, a problem Cord solved with a single rip.

As his fingers explored, and he found how ready her body was for his, he made a low sound, half groan, half growl. He fastened on her eyes, watched as he entered her. She couldn't bear more, hid her face against him, even as she locked her legs tighter around him, moved with him.

Anne had never imagined mortal humans were allowed to feel like this. Skimming waves of pleasure started deep inside where his body so rhythmically stroked, and undulated through every part of her. She couldn't keep herself quiet, couldn't…. An explosion of sensation rocked her, sent aftershocks up her spine, through her belly and breasts, ripped a sound from her she didn't know she could make. His release brought another shiver of sensation, then it was over yet he was still inside her, her legs and arms were still tightly locked around him as he slumped against her, cheek against her cheek.

Panic dispersed the last of the erotic mists. All Anne's ideas of what passed between husband and wife in the night centered around a totally passive woman. The first time she slipped her hands onto his back, enjoying the feel of his muscles moving, she had worried what he would think.

And now - now! How could she bear it if her wanton response made him ashamed of her, if there was censure in his eyes?

Perhaps he felt the change, for he stirred and straightened. Afraid to meet his gaze directly, Anne peeked quickly from the corner of her eyes. What she saw sent her heart soaring, for in his eyes was not a smile, but a grin. His voice was throaty. "So what do you think, lamb chop?"

Hours later, taking dried laundry down from the clothesline, laughter still bubbled to the surface. Anne thought as she had so often in the past months, I like him so much. Who ever would have thought I'd like him so much?

Her hands went still on the line. She did like him, but that wasn't all. When had she crossed the line and started to love him? It was not, she knew, just today. Today would not have been possible if she did not already love him. Was it the night he made the tea to ease her pain? - when he struggled to the porch and used the only

two shots he had strength for to hit Meeks, who had hurt him, and Samuels, who had hurt her? - when he tried to force her to take almost all of his cash in an effort to protect her from an uncertain fate?

Or had the small seed of friendship planted when they were both only ten years old grown slowly over all the years through the few encounters after that until it had finally flowered in these past months?

She sat on the back steps overcome by her discovery. He'll never love me back she thought. Was that true, or was she merely accepting the attitude of his family and others? Not long ago she had thought him hard, cold, and indifferent. He was really none of those things. It had only been six months.

Anne squared her shoulders and headed back to her work. If he never loves me, loving him will have to be enough, she decided, but who knows what another six months may bring?

* * *

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Chapter 25

WHEN CORD PROPOSED TAKING MARTHA up on her invitation for Sunday dinner, Anne kept her feelings to herself and agreed. In truth never spending another moment anywhere near any of his family again would have been fine with her. Except maybe Martha.

Still, considering what her own family was like, trying to get along with Cord's family was the least she could do, and it was nice not to drive two hours to town, listen to Reverend Pratt go on for another couple of hours, and then drive right home again.

Also, her father had surprised everyone by giving her mother permission to visit at Ephraim's after the Wells family's Sunday dinner was finished, so long as Rob accompanied her. Leona didn't even wash her own dishes, just left them soaking and rushed down the street.

As soon as Rob and Leona appeared, Cord disappeared. He took a "walk," which Anne knew included visits with Bob Windon, Noah Reynolds, and others like the LeClercs. She envied him the escape, because her mother and brother did not want to talk about the wonders of her new life, news around town, or the world in general.

They barely listened to the stories of the new foals that were now being born, enchanting, whisker-chinned little creatures that Anne could not see enough of. Nor were they impressed with the description of Rose's new calf, Jasmine, an equally endearing little charmer that made it hard to leave the barn after chores.

No, her mother and her brother only wanted to talk her into returning to a "decent" life. She stopped the worst of it by informing them she wouldn't listen to anything negative about her husband the first Sunday. The second Sunday, she paused only long enough to say icily, "His parents were married," then walked out of the room when Rob called Cord "that mongrel bastard."

Yet the pressure was always there as her mother described "perfect" matches, weddings, and marriages, and her brother praised almost every other female in town as a "real lady."

The Bennett family was always in the background, and in Anne's opinion, their silence was evidence of their concurrence. Usually, Cord and Anne were halfway back to the ranch before she stopped gnashing her teeth. Cord let her know in the beginning it was her choice.

"We don't have to go, you know."

"You like being around your wretched family, don't you?"

"Yeah, I do, a little. Not enough for you to be unhappy over it. Seems you need to make peace with your family too. Your mother

and brother anyway."

She sighed, but agreed, "I know. Maybe they'll calm down if I give them a while."

So they continued the Sunday visits and found an unexpected dividend. Knowing where to find him, people began to seek Cord out at Ephraim's to ask about horses for sale.

With Armand and Helene LeClerc cornering every listener, willing or unwilling, to sing the praises of Silvie the beautiful and Silvie the perfect, they sold two more of the little buggy horses in the next few weeks. Cord refused to sell Sweet William. They had to choose from the others.

"If I sell him, I'll be driving something named Petunia or Rosebud."

He sounded disgusted when he said it, but Anne knew the real reason was that he felt she liked Willie more than the others. Some Sundays they would bring two or three saddle horses in behind the buggy for people to try. Somehow buyers also seemed to be paying decent prices for the horses.

Cord was almost getting used to nervous buyers knocking on Ephraim's door and asking for him on Sunday afternoons, but when Martha answered the door one Sunday in early May and got flustered because it was Virginia Stone come to call, he was surprised.

He knew from Anne that Mrs. Stone was another of the women in town who had been constantly held up to her as a model of what she should be like. And so far as he was concerned, like all the others, she wasn't in Anne's class. She was always turned out in fancy clothes that looked hard to breathe in, and her reddish hair was always so perfectly tamed Cord wondered about glue. The only reason he knew so much about Mrs. Stone and her husband John was that Mrs. Stone's passion was her horses, and she had some enviable Thoroughbred stock.

Now he watched with amusement as the woman sat in Martha's kitchen, fiddled with a cup of coffee and worked herself up to trying to talk him into doing something she must know he wouldn't want to do.

"I have a Thoroughbred stallion I need help with," she said. "I purchased him in Kentucky last year, and since he's been here he's become increasingly difficult. At least one horseman has labeled him a rogue, but he was wonderful when I saw him back East. He's beautifully trained and he was exceptionally biddable for such a high bred stallion. Mr. Windon is unwilling to take him on, but he said you could help me."

Cord wondered if the woman had ever sat in a kitchen before or

ever addressed anyone who wasn't pure white except to give an order. Then again, maybe he should give her credit for doing those things on behalf of one of her horses.

Her gloved hands were fussing at the rim of her coffee cup. She put the cup down, hid her hands under the table, and continued. "My stableman is no longer willing to deal with Firebrand, and last night my husband told me unless I can find someone to handle the horse, he's going to have him shot. He's so angry he won't even discuss letting me sell him. Would you please give me an opinion. I'll pay you for your time."

Cord was polite but firm. "I'm sorry, Mrs. Stone. I raise and train my own. I don't have time to work spoiled stock for other people."

"He isn't spoiled," she argued. "There was no problem with him in the East, and something was wrong from the minute he arrived here. No one has been able to do more than try to ride him a few times. We exercise him by turning him out in a large paddock for several hours, and by leading him between two saddle horses, but it's hard to do even that when everyone's afraid of him."

Cord's last experience with this kind of thing was with Lathrum's useless yellow horse, and he wasn't going to be drawn in. "I'm sorry, ma'am, but no."

Mrs. Stone then played what she obviously thought was her trump card. "I understand you worked a difficult horse for Alferd Lathrum last year, that you agreed because you wanted to improve your stock with some of his Eastern breeding, and that he cheated you so that you don't have the young stallion he promised. Would an offer of breeding one of your mares to this horse change your mind? I wouldn't cheat you."

Cord had seen the big red horse in the distance once or twice and talked to Windon about him. He thought the horse was probably the best looking animal he had ever laid eyes on. He was tempted, but he had been burned badly last fall.

"That's generous of you, Mrs. Stone, but the colt I got from Lathrum is doing fine. My wife did some nursing on him and brought him around. I don't…."

Right then he made the mistake of glancing at Anne. He could see her face falling as if he were telling her no. Oh, hell, he should have known. If they were going to shoot the damn horse if nobody could do anything with it, she'd be hellbent for saving it.

When he hesitated, Mrs. Stone pressed her advantage. "Please. He's such a beautiful animal. There just has to be something wrong no one has found. He's been checked from head to toe - teeth, everything, but there must be something. Mr. Windon told me…."

Her voice trailed away.

Good old Bob, Cord thought acidly. He'd probably filled her full of magic stories. He said, "All right, Mrs. Stone, I'll come look at the horse, say Tuesday morning. If I can figure out something so you don't have to destroy him, I'll expect the breeding. If I can't help you, you don't owe me anything."

Her face lifted in a genuine smile. "Thank you very much, Mr. Bennett." She surprised him again by holding out a gloved hand, and solemnly shaking hands to seal the bargain.

Leona and Rob had come in during this discussion and were as awed by Virginia Stone's presence as Martha. As soon as the door closed behind her, Rob said, "Now there's a *real* lady."

Anne just made a face at her brother. "Which mare will we take to him?"

Cord felt like laughing at her, but didn't let it show. "Damn it, Annie, quit. Probably the horse needs to be shot."

Luke broke in to share what he knew on the subject. "Boy, are you right. He took the last couple of bronc busters tried to ride him straight through a fence. Broke one man's leg."

This slowed Anne down fast enough. "Cord," worry was written all over her, "you won't…."

He stood up and headed for the parlor. "No, I won't. I've had enough of you nursing me and pouring soup stuff down my throat for a lifetime."

Over Anne's shoulder, Cord saw Frank scowl. His brother and the rest of the family could take the words anyway damn way they wanted. All that mattered was allaying Anne's fear, and her smile told him he'd succeeded at that.

* * *

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Chapter 26

THE PEOPLE OF MASON REFERRED to John and Virginia Stone's property as an estate, and as she rode up the winding driveway beside Cord, Anne could see why. Maybe the house wasn't quite as big as her Aunt Clara's mansion in Chicago, but set on a hill with acres of land on all sides, it looked even more impressive.

The barn had also been built as much to impress as for utility. Everything was white with green trim. Two long rows of stalls were separated by a wide center aisle, and the hay loft above gave the barn more height than a two-story building.

Even though she had never been to the Stones' before, Anne was struck by the familiarity of the scene. As on the day they delivered Adamson's horses to the train, there was an unexpected crowd of curious townsfolk already leaning against most of the pretty white fence surrounding the riding areas. When they were close, she could see Ephraim and Martha, Frank, Pete, and Luke in the crowd.

Following Cord's lead, she ignored them all, and they rode right to the barn and tied Keeper and Lady outside. John and Virginia Stone and her stableman, introduced only as Lennie, were waiting.

John Stone was as elegant as his wife, a slim man of moderate height with dark hair frosted with silver on the sides and a sharply trimmed short beard. He and Lennie seemed to be having a contest to see who could look more bored by having to put up with this hopeless, last ditch effort.

Virginia Stone was upset and more than slightly embarrassed. "I'm so sorry. I didn't mention this to anyone, but it seems my husband has."

John Stone was not apologetic. He just leaned against the barn wall and crossed his arms.

Cord ignored them all and walked over to look at the horse through the barred top of the stall. Beside him, Anne caught her breath. The horse was a glowing deep red without a single marking. Quality showed in the shapely ears, the broad, flat forehead, small muzzle and tracing of veins visible under the satiny coat. Everything about the animal seemed to flow smoothly together. He looked powerful, yet refined.

Restlessly pacing the stall, Firebrand gave evidence of the quality and athletic ability that had lured Virginia Stone to buy him, and also of the foul, dangerous attitude that made John Stone want to see him shot.

Anne was ready to leave right then, but Cord moved to the

Dutch door to the stall and opened the top half. The stallion immediately charged at him, not just with teeth bared, but with his whole mouth gaping wide enough to seize a man's shoulder and crush it.

Cord evaded the charge easily, then left the top door open and leaned against the opposite wall of the aisleway. "Tell me about what he was like back East in a stall and what he was like when he first got here."

Nervously, Mrs. Stone said the horse was docile and good natured in the stall when she first saw him. The breeder claimed he had an unusually fine nature and it had seemed so. When he had first arrived in Colorado last November, the horse was restless and nervous, as might be expected, but he only started biting and kicking weeks later. His stall manners degenerated parallel to the difficulties under saddle. At first he was uncooperative, then totally unwilling, and finally he began to fight a rider violently and aggressively.

"Mm. Till he took two men through your fence."

Mrs. Stone had the grace to look ashamed.

Cord again walked to the open stall door, and the horse charged again. He hit the horse with a hard fist right in the soft skin over the teeth at the side of the muzzle with such force the horse rocked back. The stallion retreated to the back of the stall and stood working his lips and thinking it over.

Anne felt sick with fear. If Cord were hurt by this monster, it would be all her fault. "Cord? Maybe…." He just looked at her, and she stopped.

At a jerk of his head she followed him down the barn aisleway out of hearing of the others. "If you're going to fuss, we'll walk out right now."

"I don't want you hurt is all."

"Annie, I'm not going to get hurt over a damn horse. If you can't believe that, let's go."

She bit her lower lip. Trusting is the hardest part. "I believe you."

"All right then. Want to help?"

She nodded, unable to see how she could help. They returned to the horse's stall, to John Stone's sarcastic, "Strategy all planned?" Anne controlled an urge to slap him. Cord didn't seem to hear.

The horse was still standing along the back wall of the stall, motionless, ears slightly back. Cord's instructions horrified Anne, but she took the position he indicated, as did Mrs. Stone.

"Now, I'm going to stand with my back to him. Mrs. Stone, you start telling me everything you can remember about when you saw

him back East. Every detail. He's going to come at me, and you do your best to just keep talking when he does in a normal voice. Don't jump. Don't scream. Doesn't matter what you say right then. Try to keep it conversational is all. Annie, keep your eyes on him. He's going to pin his ears when he comes. Not just a little, they'll flatten right out on his head. When you see that, you move your hand, like this." He demonstrated.

Anne heard Mrs. Stone's voice droning on and on and couldn't understand a word. She stared at the big red monster until her eyes hurt, and then the ears went! She waved her hand instantly, clamping down on her already aching jaw even harder to keep from crying out.

Cord was positioned in the doorway so that the horse could only come at one side, and he whirled and smashed the stallion in the mouth again, with the same result.

Anne could see Mrs. Stone trembling and knew she was doing the same.

Cord said, "That's good. Now we do it again. This time he's probably going to mosey over looking as innocent as he can and take a good look at me. He'll get close and then try it again. Watch his ears."

The women watched wide-eyed, Mrs. Stone no longer making good sense in her nervous attempts at ordinary sounding speech. The horse meandered closer and closer, nosing the bedding and trying to look uninterested in the man. Near the stall door his nostrils dilated as he took deep suspicious breaths. Then the ears pinned. Cord didn't have time to turn. He smashed the horse with an elbow in about the same place.

Anne just managed to suppress a moan. "Now what," she whispered.

"Try it again. We'll give him half an hour. If he comes again, Mr. Stone is right - best thing is to shoot him."

Mrs. Stone took up her nervous recitation again, steadied by questions from Cord, and finally, he questioned Lennie about the horse's behavior. Young and cocky, Lennie was not pleased to see this man unafraid of the horse that terrified him. He was sullen and uncooperative, giving monosyllabic answers, but the half hour passed.

The horse had moved up behind Cord and was looking him over and testing his scent, but made no further move toward him. Cord walked in the stall and attached a rope to the horse's halter with no fuss. When he tied the animal and began running a brush over him, Mrs. Stone said, "He kicks."

"Bet not."

He was right. The horse lifted a hind leg several times but never tried a kick. Minutes later Cord had his saddle off Keeper and on the stallion. He rejected the bridle Lennie held out and asked for one as similar as possible to what the horse was ridden with back East. With this on the horse's head, he began to gently play with the reins. In seconds the horse's ears were pinned flat to his head and fury was in every line. The bridle came off.

"Annie, get the bridle in the saddle bags, will you?" Cord's saddle was stripped down in anticipation of riding the stallion. The only saddle bags were on Lady.

She ran. The crowd outside was restless and noisy, but had grown, not diminished. With his own bridle on the horse, Cord began to play with the reins again.

Mrs. Stone objected, "But that's a colt bridle. He's gone through the fence with quite severe bits. You'll never hold him with that."

Cord didn't even answer. Almost right away Anne could see a difference. The horse's ears were flicking uncertainly, but he was no longer hardening his jaw and sticking his nose straight out with every touch of a rein. "How many people were around the day you saw him ridden?"

Anne knew he was wondering about the effect of the crowd on the horse.

Mrs. Stone said, "Quite a few, really. There was a hunt that morning. And they were very noisy. It was a cold morning and there was some brandy passed around."

"Let's go see." He walked the horse out of the barn and headed for the smallest of the fenced riding areas. As he walked out with the horse, the noise of the onlookers subsided. Anne followed along with the Stones, taking up a position right beside the gate. She watched Cord walk along beside the horse, still gently twitching and feeling the reins as the animal walked around. Suddenly she was surrounded by Bennetts.

"That took a while." Frank was looking not at her but at his brother.

She needed to tell somebody. "It was awful. That horse really is vicious. I wish I could go back and relive last Sunday, and we wouldn't be here."

Frank said, "The thing you've got to learn is that Cord's meaner than most of what he comes up against. You were worried about him the day he half-killed those poor yahoos too, if I remember."

Anne clamped her mouth into a hard straight line. Frank probably wouldn't be bothered a bit if the damn horse stomped his brother. Surely the Bennetts couldn't be any more aggravating, but then Luke proved her wrong.

He said, “Most people are betting he won’t even have the nerve to get on that killer, you know.”

Anne forced words through tight lips. “What do you mean, ‘betting’?”

“The real thing. There’s a lot of money going around. Most people think he won’t even try to ride the horse. Some say he’ll try and get thrown. Windon says he’ll get it done. Personally, the way he fiddles around with horses, I figure he will ride it - someday.”

Anne turned to Frank, doing her best to hide anger behind a polite smile. “When I left home I had twenty dollars, but I don’t have it with me. Would you loan me twenty dollars until Sunday?”

Frank pulled twenty dollars from his pocket and handed it to her without a word.

“Thank you, Frank. Now, Luke, I’ve never placed a bet. Would you or Pete bet this for me? Bet it that he’ll ride that horse.”

“Ah, come on, to win the bet he has to really ride it, not just be on it when it goes through the fence.”

Before Anne could draw breath to answer, Frank intervened. “Just go bet the money for her, son.” Luke gave his father an uncertain look. “Go.” Shaking his head, Luke went and got Pete from a few feet off, and the two disappeared into the crowd.

Anne could see that Cord was no longer just walking beside the horse but directing it. They stopped, began again, turned each way. Time passed. The crowd was bored and getting louder once more. The horse halted, as it had a dozen times, but this time Cord eased into the saddle so smoothly some of the watchers, involved in their own conversations, didn’t immediately notice.

Soon all eyes were on the big red horse and the lithe figure in the saddle. The horse continued to walk quietly, following the same patterns it had with Cord on the ground. Moments later he eased into a trot and began to execute more little circles, turns, and patterns, the same ones he had Anne put Lady through. The horse dropped back to an easy walk then was off again around the pen’s perimeter at a relaxed canter. After a few small circuits of the pen’s perimeter, the horse glided through the center of the pen, effortlessly changing his leading leg as he changed direction.

Anne loved to watch Cord ride. He was straight in the saddle, not in a stiff military fashion but in a relaxed, easy way. No matter how complicated the maneuver he put a horse through, his cues were almost too subtle to be seen. He was always still and quiet, very much one with the horse. She felt the tension drain away. He was right. He wasn’t going to get hurt.

He brought the horse back to a walk and stopped in front of the Stones. John Stone did not look particularly happy at the success of

this venture. Virginia Stone looked ecstatic.

Leaning one arm casually on the saddle horn, Cord ignored John and addressed Virginia. “Ma’am, if you’ve been exercising this horse enough he’s muscled up, I’d sure like to ride him outside. This is the best horse I’ve ever been on.”

Mrs. Stone’s smile faltered, and she looked nervous again, but she nodded jerkily. Frank swung the gate open. Cord took the horse to the big open area where the Stones and their friends played polo and began to experiment with what the stallion could do.

Anne watched lead changes, side passes, half passes, and pirouettes with growing delight. Concentrating on the graceful figure in the saddle, she didn’t realize Frank was beside her again until she heard his voice.

“Have you see him ride like that before?”

“Yes. He’s shown me things on both Keeper and Lady, but this horse is so beautiful. It’s impressive with Keeper, but not like this.”

The patterns were beginning to flow together until it looked as if the horse were dancing.

Frank spoke again, “That’s two things he got a lot better at those years he was away.”

Anne didn’t move her eyes but asked, “What’s the other?”

“Fighting.”

Anne took several steps forward then, letting Frank know she wasn’t pursuing the subject and getting closer to admire both the horse and her man. Cord was on the far side of the graded area now and turned the horse straight towards her. Backlit by the sun, he was an erect dark shadow on the red horse with its halo of fire. His eyes were invisible but she could feel them fastened on her, compelling.

Breathless, Anne watched the horse bearing straight towards her, changing leading leg every other stride. It was the most difficult maneuver he had ever demonstrated for her, and she knew this was for her, a gift. The stallion turned only feet from her, cantered by. It ended too soon. All at once he was on the ground, walking toward her, as cat-like as the horse in his own way.

“Come on, Ti-gress, we’d better tell Mrs. Stone what’s wrong with her horse.”

Anne had no idea what was wrong with the horse, but walked beside him, stifling an urge to skip. He wasn’t hurt, he’d ridden the horse, and all these fool people were disappointed once more.

She listened to Cord explain to Mrs. Stone that the sellers had misled her as to the horse’s bitting and how he thought they’d done it. Exceptionally sensitive, the horse fought, and when they tried to control him with more severe bits, he fought harder. Resentment

eventually affected even his attitude in the stall, and when people who were afraid of him began pushing him around with a broom or shovel, everything escalated. He never glanced at Lennie as he said this.

Mrs. Stone was not happy. “But I ride all my horses in double bridles with curb bits. A plain snaffle is too crude for the kind of riding I do.”

Anne almost interrupted to point out that considering the demonstration she had just seen, this was patently ridiculous, but managed to bite her tongue. Of course, Cord didn’t point it out.

He said, “Well, ma’am, the horse is touchy, and he’s always going to be that way.”

“Could you get him to go properly with a curb bit? I’ll pay you well, or you can have additional breedings if you’d prefer.”

“Yeah, I can, but you should realize he’s always going to be an extra sensitive horse. He might not be something you’re going to want to bother with.”

“I see.” She was frowning, obviously not happy with any of this. “Well, suppose you take him and at least get him to where he can be safely ridden, and then if I don’t like him for myself, I’ll be able to sell him. I certainly can’t do that the way he is now.”

Cord glanced at Anne, who wiggled her eyebrows in a “whatever you want” kind of way.

“It will take about two months,” he said. “Suppose we breed one mare for each month.”

Virginia Stone held out one slim gloved hand, and they again shook hands. John Stone looked absolutely disgusted as they rode out, Cord leading the big red horse beside Keeper.

The whole Bennett clan was waiting for them at the end of the driveway. “How about lunch at our house?” asked Ephraim.

Cord had mentioned a steak at the cafe to Anne earlier, but then they hadn’t expected to be bringing the stallion home with them. He said, “Yeah, sounds good, if we can put the red horse in a stall in your barn.”

Anne knew right then that Cord was no more going to refer to this stallion as “Firebrand” than he would call Willie “Sweet William.”

So it was off to Ephraim’s for lunch. When they were all in their familiar places around the table, Luke pulled a small sheaf of twenty-dollar bills from his pocket and presented them to her with a flourish. “Here’s your ill-gotten gains, ma’am.”

Anne had forgotten the bet. “But I only bet twenty dollars.”

“The odds were five to one.”

She had only the vaguest concept of odds, and Luke happily

enlightened her. At the end of his explanation, she heard Cord drawl in a way she didn't like the sound of at all, "Where'd you get twenty dollars, Annie?"

"I borrowed from Frank - against my Grenerton money." Reminded by her own words, she handed one of the twenties to Frank.

There was a lot of chatter over lunch, but it was mostly Pete and Luke reviewing the morning's happenings. Anne was as quiet as Cord, and when Martha and Judith refused her help with the dishes, they left immediately. In the barn, Cord turned on her as she'd known he would.

"What the hell would you use to get to Grenerton if you'd lost your twenty dollars?"

The taut skin around his eyes told her he was angry, but she could not for the life of her decide why. "You know as well as I do I'm never going to Grenerton, so what's the difference?"

"Never's a long time."

Reason wasn't going to get her far. Perhaps this was as good a time as any to mention something that was bothering *her*.

"You know, I've begun to wonder lately. Are you so determined that I'm going to leave sooner or later because that's what you want? Do you figure you're going to get tired of having me around, or are you feeling that way already, and you want to make sure you don't have to feel guilty when you throw me out in a snowdrift when the time comes?"

He studied her face carefully, and she could see the tight look disappearing from around his eyes. "You know better than that."

"Why should I know better than that? If you can nurse absurd notions, why can't I? Maybe you'd just better face the fact that you're stuck with me. When you're ninety years old you're going to wake up in the morning, and there I'll be - with white hair and wrinkles - and you'll still be stuck."

She could see the smile start around his eyes. He didn't really answer her. "I suppose you did all right today anyway. Now your Grenerton money will get you to Denver."

Drat him. He really was stubborn.

THE FRIENDS WHO HAD QUIETLY snooped around and asked questions about the Bennetts on Edward Wells' behalf all reported pretty much the same thing. No matter how the family felt about its black sheep, you couldn't count on them standing aside if he was in trouble. In fact it would be more likely that any threat to a member of the family would have the whole bunch of them standing shoulder to shoulder against the outsider.

One of Edward's friends had known old Jamie Bennett himself and informed Edward sagely, "Jamie didn't raise no weaklings. People are all afraid of that 'breed, but even the lawyer son, you make him pick up a gun, and he'll remember how to use it. Frank now, he was the next best thing to a gunman before he settled down. They say those two young ones, Luke and Pete, are almost as bad. Everything I hear, your daughter kind of likes that Injun, Ed, maybe you ought to just let it be."

Edward's frigid glare cut this line of conversation dead, but the fact had to be faced, a direct frontal assault was out. Ike Handler had been right, the thing to do was to convince the damn Indian and his family that Anne had wanted to return to her family and had done just that.

It shouldn't be hard to fool an ignorant savage. Some care would need to be taken because of his educated white relatives. Edward began an involved correspondence with his sister Clara in Chicago.

* * *

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Chapter 27

TWO WEEKS LATER VIRGINIA STONE was back in Martha's kitchen on Sunday afternoon. What she wanted this time was just plain impossible, but Anne kept quiet, knowing Cord would turn her down flat.

"I've decided to sell Firebrand as soon as he you think he's progressed enough," she said. "My husband really wants that, and he wants him in the July race. If he can win the race, or even make a good showing, we'll get a much better price. John hopes we can get as much as I paid."

Anne expected Cord to just say no, but instead he made a brief attempt at reasoning with her. "Mrs. Stone, that race is designed to cripple or kill. It won't help you sell him if he's lame for the rest of his life - or dead."

The woman didn't look happy, but she was obviously determined to do what her husband wanted.

"John doesn't believe the risk is that great compared to the possible gain. I've given him my word. I will sell the horse to the first person who offers at least what I paid. We'd like you to ride him in the race since you get along with him so well."

"Ma'am, people bring some of the fastest horses in the state to that race, and your horse isn't as fast as some of what will be here. He wasn't bred for speed, was he?"

"He was bred as a hunter, but he's from excellent lines, and John believes…." Her voice tapered off as she watched Cord just get up and walk out.

Turning to Anne, Mrs. Stone said, "Is he always that rude? I can't believe such behavior, and after all, he owes us…."

Anne cut her off sharply. "We don't owe you anything, and he walked out to avoid saying something *very* rude. Your ears would probably burn. We're both very fond of that horse already, and you're asking him to put himself and the horse in danger over a foolish notion."

"I believe you do owe me. Our agreement was that you would use Firebrand for one mare for each month your husband worked my horse, and you've already done that, haven't you?"

"One mare. We used him for one mare, and Cord earned that right the day he first rode the horse. He's been adamant about not using the horse for the other mares until after the right is earned, and I thought he was being too careful. Silly me."

Balked at using what she had thought was a weapon to get her own way, Mrs. Stone tried honey. "Well, I know you can talk to him.

It's really very important to John and me. Won't you help persuade him, dear?"

"I'm not going to try to persuade him to do anything that he feels is wrong. He'll think it over for himself, but you'd better count on having the horse back in your barn next Sunday, if not sooner."

Mrs. Stone opened the outside door and looked back from the doorway. "My husband thinks we can continue to exercise the horse the way we have been, between two saddle horses, and a good rider will be able to just get on him the day of the race."

"Good luck. I bet that will double his value all right."

The door shut almost hard enough to be a slam, but not quite. Virginia Stone was after all, the quintessential lady.

Leona chastised her daughter. "Anne, dear, you shouldn't be speaking that way to someone like Mrs. Stone."

"And what does that mean, Mother? Perhaps I should only be making respectful, agreeable comments in between licks at her boots?"

This brought Rob to his feet. "Don't you dare speak to Mother like that. You know perfectly well you should speak to a lady like Mrs. Stone with respect, and you know why. Since you've been living with that degenerate you've lost all signs of a decent upbringing. You act and talk like a guttersnipe. Someone needs to take you in hand and remind you of your manners!"

Cord wore hard soled boots on Sundays, but he still moved so quietly he had the door open enough to hear Rob before anyone knew he was back. "I hope you don't think you might be that 'someone,'" he growled.

Rob paled and spun to face him. "I suppose you think it's funny, don't you? Not only have you ruined her so she can never live with decent people here in Mason again. By the time you're finished she'll have the speech and manners of a common saloon girl and won't fit in anywhere."

Cord leaned back against the wall beside the door. "Annie, why don't you wait for me in the barn. I think it's time your brother and I had a talk."

She walked out without a murmur.

Rob took an involuntary step backwards, and everyone started looking uncomfortable.

"I said talk, boy. Just calm down."

"I'm not a boy, and I don't want to talk to you."

"Too bad. Listen. I know the sheriff told the bunch of you what happened last fall, but he could only tell what he knew and the ladies made him kind of shy, so I'm going to make sure you understand what happened to your sister. The ladies can leave.

You're going to listen."

Keeping his voice flat, he threw the facts at Rob like stones. "Your father beat her till she was hanging almost unconscious in Samuels' arms. Her face was so swollen you wouldn't have recognized her, and she was running blood from the nose and mouth. Your father wanted an excuse so he could still force her to marry Detrick, and the rest wanted an excuse to hang me, but she wouldn't tell the lie they needed. So they all looked the other way while Samuels pawed her, took a knife and cut her dress open. She's got a scar down her back from her hairline to her waist. Craig said it should have been stitched, but there was no one to stitch it, was there? The bastard bit her all over the face, neck, and shoulders - her skin was broken. She had bruises from her neck to her knees. He even tried to jam a couple of fingers…."

"Stop." Rob's jaw was clenching and unclenching in ridges.

"I'm not through yet. Samuels finally stopped because she was vomiting up the first food she had in days. He threw her away from him on her knees in the mud, and she was still there when your father pulled her head up and told her he was leaving her there to 'repent.' Your nice neat military father didn't want her riding double on a horse with him like that, bloody and stinking."

Rob looked pasty white and his hands were shaking slightly. He didn't answer, but then Cord didn't expect him to.

"So they left her there with what was supposed to be a dead man, and when she found I was alive, she got me into the house somehow. You have any idea what that was like for your lady-raised sister? I was unconscious for days. She was spooning liquid in me, and cleaning up the mess when it came out. Want to hear about the bloody pools I'd wake up in? Two days later they came back to steal what they could thinking I was dead and the place was empty. Want to hear what Meeks said they'd do to her when they found her there?"

"Cord, please, please, stop." It was the first time Leona ever addressed him.

He didn't even glance at her. "Fact is she found all those tea and crumpet lady manners didn't spare her a lot of misery she didn't deserve, and they wouldn't have kept her or me alive either. So she threw them away. So if she doesn't fit some idea you have of how she should act any more, that's too damn bad. If she wants to yell and curse or jump up and down or do anything else, she earned the right. And you've earned nothing, absolutely nothing, so you keep your mouth shut around her or I'll shut it for you."

Then he was gone as soundlessly as he'd come, leaving a roomful of stunned, queasy people.

Leona was close to tears. “Rob, take me home, please.”

When they were gone, Frank ran his fingers through his hair and said, “That explains some of it. He thinks he owes her. I’ve never heard so many consecutive words out of him in his life.”

Ephraim said, “Maybe he does owe her.”

“She brought the trouble to him.”

“That’s not fair, Frank. It was more like a rockslide that caught them both.”

“Maybe. It’s a lousy basis for a marriage.”

ANNE HAD STARTED HARNESSING WILLIE as soon as she got to the barn. They couldn’t start home soon enough for her. By the time Cord joined her, the horse was ready to put to the buggy.

He said, “I’m sorry, Annie, I came back because I realized I left you in the middle of it.”

She tried to smile at him, but it was a feeble effort. “I should have had the sense to leave with you.”

Cord walked over to her, and she burrowed against his neck. He held her hard, and she caught the scent of him, of soap, and the fresh Sunday shirt, felt the warm solid strength of his chest and shoulder and was comforted.

His voice rumbled under her ear. “Gave you a rough time, did they?”

“Not that bad, really. It upsets me what she’s going to do to Red, and I was short with her, and Rob started in on how a social failure like me shouldn’t be rude to a paragon like Mrs. Stone.”

His lips were gentle at her temple. “I don’t know much about ladies, Annie, but seems like it’s supposed to be more what’s inside you that matters, and you’ve got more class than that poor woman with all her fancy airs will ever know about.”

A contented sigh escaped her. “Maybe you should have been a doctor. You really know how to fix the hurt.”

“Mm. You’re the only one ever thought so. Come on, let’s get Willie hitched and get out of here before they all come boiling out of the house, sure I’m torturing you.”

Anne managed a real laugh at this, but as soon as they were clear of town she rode the rest of the way home with her head on his shoulder.

For two days, neither Cord nor Anne mentioned the fact that the red horse must go back to his owners. Cord had definite, and to Anne humorous, theories that most horses, given a choice, preferred women to men. She understood when he said women were lighter and not being as strong were less likely to try to use brute force, but when he started in on how women were softer and smelled better,

she never could smother the giggles.

So, thinking Virginia Stone would want to ride the horse herself when it was returned to her, since the beginning of the stallion's stay with them, Cord worked the horse for an hour or so and then put Anne on him for her riding lesson. By the third ride all her reservations about the copper-colored horse dissolved. If he had sprouted the wings of Pegasus she could not have thought he was more wonderful.

The thought of returning Red to the Stones under these circumstances made Anne miserable. She knew Cord was no happier, but on Tuesday night he set the time.

"Suppose tomorrow morning we take him back."

"Not Sunday?"

"No use putting it off. Maybe it wouldn't hurt to go take a look at that race course first though."

Anne bit back the protest that came immediately to her lips. She didn't want him to have anything to do with the race. Trust him she thought. "Maybe it wouldn't hurt."

They were in town before ten the next morning, Anne riding Red, Cord leading a four-year-old he would let see a little of the town before going home. First, they picked up a copy of the race entry form and rules at the feed store.

I should have known Anne thought hours later. Cord had pulled all sorts of strings and measuring devices out of his saddle bags. He equipped her with a pencil and paper, and she wrote down measurement after measurement. They had just completed two tours of the five-mile race course. He never did anything by halves.

Many people in Mason considered the race the town's greatest asset. There was no denying that every year the town's economy was given a great boost as contestants and spectators flooded the town for days before race day, some coming from great distances.

The businessmen of Mason contributed fifteen hundred dollars each year, which was awarded one thousand dollars to the winner, three hundred to the second place horse, and two hundred to the third place horse, a considerable draw. Large sums changed hands in wagers.

The whole town took on an excited fair-like atmosphere for the event, but Anne wasn't the only one who avoided everything to do with the race, for there was no question Cord was right. The course was over such severe terrain and for such a great distance that more than a few horses had been crippled by it. Most years of the ten to twenty horses that started the race one or two were never of any use again. In the fifteen years of the race there had been one rider killed and several who been hurt badly.

The race was roughly a five-mile circle, starting and finishing at a point that had once been outside the town but which now was a roadway with a few houses scattered along it. The unique features of the race were provided by a sandy wash, cut through with a stream. In July, the wash was usually almost dry, but in the spring the runoff flooded the whole area and had cut a deep, winding gully.

The course was marked with permanently set four-foot posts which were given a new coat of bright red paint each year. After a straight mile and a half run into the wash, the course first led through an area strewn with downed trees, broken limbs, and other hazards that cut and tore at the thin skin over fine equine legs. Then the horses had to negotiate the creek bed itself for more than a quarter of a mile. Walking a horse through the debris-filled water was tricky. Taking the creek bed at a dead run was dangerous.

The course then looped away from the creek, returning to it in an area of less sand, firmer ground, and more trees. Here the water had cut deeper. The racers had to cross the creek at a point where the banks dropped almost vertically twelve and fifteen feet on each side. From bank to bank was only about ten feet, which might have tempted some to try to jump the distance, but both banks of the creek were hemmed by trees with low-hanging branches. Riders wove and ducked among the trees, raced headlong down one bank, again risked slim legs in the creek bed, and plunged up the far bank.

After that, marker posts were set just before the opening to a narrow gully that wound treacherously for almost a mile. Steep banks on either side forced the horses to stay in the order in which they had entered the ravine. The floor of the gully was littered with enough flood debris to make the going dangerous, and gnarled tree roots were exposed in each bank, seeming to reach for the horses and riders to rip at the flesh of the unwary or careless.

Emerging from what those familiar with the race called “the Narrows,” there was still a brutal mile and a half straight, slightly uphill run to the finish line.

Anne had watched the race once as a girl. Ever since, she had found somewhere else to be on race day. Now here she was, studying every inch of the dreadful course.

After the second time around, they rode to the cafe. Dora had long since decided they were acceptable customers, and over lunch Anne watched Cord draw a map of the route, filling in their measurements here and there. When he was done, he explained to her what he had in mind.

She stared at the paper and thought of what they had seen and measured this morning and looked at Cord with disbelief. “Can that

be done?"

"They hunted that horse back East. It's what he was bred for. That means jumping stone walls, hedges, gates, chicken coops, things like that. It's no sure thing, but it's possible."

"If Stones knew, it would be all over town. They'd fix it so you couldn't."

"Can't tell Stones. Just that we'd try the race."

She thought of injuries she'd heard of riders getting in that race. Stones would say no and keep him safe. "Let's go do it then."

It was as Anne hoped. Cord told Stones he would ride the horse in the race if they would accept that he would do it with keeping the horse safe as his primary concern and with doing well secondary. They would not accept that. They wanted a commitment to ride the horse all out to win, and Cord would not give it.

In the end, Cord and Anne left the red stallion in the stall they had taken him from only a few weeks before and headed for home, Cord riding the four-year-old, and Anne on Keeper.

Anne was trying hard to conceal her unhappiness but knew she had failed abysmally when Cord murmured, "Sorry, babe."

"It's not our fault they're fools. It's just too bad Red's going to pay for their foolishness."

"Maybe not. They still have to find somebody who can ride him."

"*I* can ride him. Anybody can ride him now you've fixed him."

"Mm. Better give yourself more credit. Back with Lennie, your lesson horse may start scaring them all spitless again. Half hope he does."

When Sunday rolled around again, Cord's words were proven prophetic. This time it was John Stone causing a fluster in the Bennett household, and Cord saw no reason to pretend a respect he didn't feel.

He said, "Took somebody through a fence again, did he?"

John Stone held himself stiffly, obviously hating having to ask anything of Cord. "No, as a matter of fact he hasn't. That boy of Windon's assured us he could handle the horse. When he came to look at the animal, it charged him, and he lashed out with his quirt and caught the horse near the eye. No one has been able to do a thing with the animal since, not even doctor the wound, although it really is minor."

"So you want me to come doctor him."

"That's not the problem. The injury is minor. My wife and I have discussed this at some length. The idea is to convince potential buyers the horse has some worth. Incidents such as this will not accomplish that. We would like you to take the horse again, do the

work originally agreed upon on the agreed terms, and race the horse on the terms you offered. As incentive, we will turn over to you any prize money the animal may win in the race."

Cord made a sound close to a contemptuous snort. "Generous. I told you he might be dead last if that's what it takes to keep him in one piece."

"Be that as it may, that is our offer," Stone said. "The whole town is talking about the fact that your wife rode the horse to town the day you returned him to us. Is that another example of your 'Indian magic?'"

Cord tipped the chair back slightly and examined the man closely. So that was it. Seeing Anne on the horse had already started to quell some of the stallion's outlaw reputation. He said with deliberate offensiveness, "Yeah, sure, I sprinkle her with rattlesnake dust first then throw her up there."

An angry flush spread across Stone's face. Standing, he said, "When may I have your answer?" His tone negated the polite words.

Ready to tell him to go to hell, Cord once more made the mistake of glancing at Anne. Her head was bowed and her hands were gripping each other so hard her knuckles were white.

"I'll come get him in a while," he told Stone, who gave a triumphant little smile and strutted out.

Anne raised her head, eyes moist and shining. "You don't have to…."

"Yeah, I know I don't." As he got to his feet, she started to rise too, but he shook his head. "You stay here and visit with your mother."

"But, I…."

"If the eye's a mess, I don't need to listen to you about it. Stay here."

He expected her to argue, but she smiled at him and sat back down.

Luke then surprised him by asking, "Can Pete and I come along?"

He shrugged, knowing his nephews would take it as permission, and walked out with them on his heels.

* * *

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Chapter 28

FRANK WAS THE BENNETT WHO aggravated Anne the very most, although there were days when Ephraim or the boys were in the running. And she hadn't even seen Judith in full hysteria mode yet. Anne was aware that something had been bothering Frank for some time, but didn't really expect him to ever come out with it.

Today, though, as she chatted with her mother, Frank made no move to retreat to the parlor for whatever men did when they left women with the dishes. He and Ephraim both stayed put, but it was Frank who kept glancing at her, obviously getting ready to say something.

When there was a pause in the conversation, she expected him to say something so obnoxious that she'd have to leave and wait for Cord outside, but he surprised her by pussyfooting around.

"Anne, would you answer a question that's been itching at me a while?"

She looked at him with suspicion. "Such as?"

"I don't want you to get your back up and take it wrong. I'd really like to know, if you know yourself, that is. Why aren't you afraid of him?"

She frowned and felt her mouth tightening already. "Why should I be? He's never done anything to make me afraid."

Ephraim said, "He hasn't done anything to any of the women in this town so far as I know, but any other one of them would have run off screaming if they woke up in that barn and saw him standing there. I'm curious myself, Anne. Were you afraid and you got over it nursing him like that? Or were you never afraid?"

Anne looked back and forth between the two brothers, her frown slowly disappearing. Why not tell them? "We've been friends in a way ever since I first met him - when we were both ten."

Anne enjoyed the look on Frank's face. Hadn't it ever occurred to him that she and Cord would have crossed paths in a town the size of Mason long before last fall?

After a look around at all the curious faces, Anne gave in, folded her hands on the table and began to tell the story.

"It was when we first moved here, my first week in school here. That's when you sent Cord and Marie to the school in town."

"It didn't work," Frank said. "They only went for a few days."

"That's because the teacher we had that year was small minded and evil," Anne said angrily. "She didn't just ignore what happened, she encouraged it."

"We knew there'd be some teasing and testing," Frank said. "We

thought it would work out and be better for them in the end."

"It would have if you'd picked a year when Miss Striker was gone," Anne said. "She was as bad as my father. You see it wasn't just teasing. The boys all got together and really tried to beat Cord to a pulp. The problem was they couldn't. He always managed to get one of them alone long enough to make him sorry he'd tried, so they gave up on him. But then the girls started. Somehow I always thought Miss Striker gave them the idea. They pinched, they hit, they spit, they insulted."

Frank shrugged. "And he ignored them."

"Yes," Anne said, "but Marie was only eight and not that strong, and they turned on her next."

"Damn it," Frank said. "Why didn't they tell us?"

"The same reason most of us don't tell our parents things at that age, I guess," Anne said. "Anyway, on Friday it really got out of hand. I don't know if they planned it or not, but the boys went for Cord again and got him away from Marie, and then the girls started pushing Marie back and forth until she fell. Priscilla Carson actually sat on Marie and slapped her and was spitting on her and calling her names. Cord got away from the boys but then he just stood there. He says he didn't know what to do. You'd always taught him he wasn't supposed to hit girls no matter what."

"Dear Lord," Martha said. "Did the teacher stop it then?"

"No," Anne said. "I did. I grabbed Prissy by her pigtails and pulled her off Marie and socked her right in the jaw and called her every bad name I knew and some I didn't really know, just had heard. *That's* when Miss Striker chose to notice what was going on. And guess who was in trouble?"

When school let out for the day, Cord approached Anne, Marie by the hand. His exact words always stuck in her mind.

"Thank you, Miss Wells, for helping my sister. I didn't know what to do."

Anne was at the age when all boys seemed to her dirty, mean creatures, and she walked home from school that day mulling it over in her mind. If they were all like that, she decided, boys wouldn't be so bad.

"I know Rob was too young to remember, but I'm surprised you didn't, Mother."

Leona had listened to Anne's tale as intently as the Bennetts. She said, "You were in that kind of trouble so much in those days, and we were so new in town we didn't really know anyone. I'm not sure I ever knew why you did it. The teacher said you attacked another little girl for no reason."

"No one would even let me tell my side of it," Anne said.

Martha said, “Well, at least Cord thanked you. It’s a blessing you were there. Marie got hysterical that weekend and said she’d rather die than go back, and Cord said he’d go, but we shouldn’t make Marie go. So we gave up and kept them home. I wish we’d known all this back then.”

Anne was sad at the memory. “It wouldn’t have made any difference. Miss Striker was there another two years.”

Martha began to refill coffee cups, and it was she who said, “So you were friends after that. Was that all?”

Anne smiled mischievously up at Martha. “No, there were two other ‘encounters.’ The second time I got in just as much trouble. Rob should remember that one, but maybe Mother’s right. I was in trouble so often, no one but me remembers each incident.”

“I remember.” Rob said suddenly. “I was still in school and I got in fights with some of the other boys over what they said about you.”

“I didn’t think you ever *defended* me.” Anne said. “I thought no accusation was too heinous.”

“You’d be surprised,” Rob said sullenly.

She reached over and gave him a hug and kiss on the cheek. “Well, thank you, years too late.”

Anne went back to the story then. “If Rob was still in school, we must have been nineteen that winter. There was snow on the ground. I had been shopping and was on my way home. My arms were full of parcels, and I cut through the alley behind Elm Street. I turned around the back of Miles’ store to get back to Main Street, and Cord was coming the other way, and we crashed into each other. I slipped in the snow and went down on my back, the packages went every which way, my skirts were all rucked up, and Cord kind of just froze there staring at me.”

“Thank God nobody knew about that part,” Rob muttered.

“Maybe so,” Anne admitted, “but I thought it was funny. I remember trying to tease him and asking him if he was going to stand there like a fence post or help me up.”

Cord did help her up, acting as if he expected to be burned by the contact. Only now, years later, had she found out from him that he expected her to start screaming, accusing him of deliberate assault, if not worse. When she started to laugh, he recognized her and realized she wasn’t going to make accusations, but he was still leery.

Oblivious of what Cord recognized as a sticky situation, she piled half the packages in his arms. “The least you can do for knocking me over is to help me home with all these.”

Short of dropping her parcels back in the mud and snow, he

had no choice, but he refused to walk through town beside her and followed a few steps behind. When they reached the Wells house, he deposited the packages on the edge of the porch, tipped his hat, and disappeared like smoke in the wind.

"My feelings were half hurt because I always thought of him as a friend since that business in school. I'd smile at him when I saw him in town, and he'd always tip his hat or nod at me or something, but the fuss everyone made about that walk through town made me realize he was just smarter than I was. I mean it was broad daylight, we were in the middle of town, and he just carried some packages for me, but the town busybodies couldn't tell Mother and Father about it fast enough."

Leona said, "My goodness, I do remember that. Your father was very upset, and he was already worried about Elroy Turrell.

Frank ignored Edward Wells' worries and Elroy Turrell. "So what was the other time?" he asked.

Into the spirit of the story telling now, Anne made a wry face and continued with the final encounter with Cord before last October. It was the only time she didn't get in trouble, because no one ever knew.

"I took a shortcut through that same alley again, and there was a half grown kitten just huddling back there. He didn't even try to get away when I picked him up. One hind leg had a horrible wound that looked all infected, and he seemed just sick and dull. I knew I couldn't take him home. Father doesn't believe in pets. I couldn't think of anyone in town who might help, and I was really upset, when all of a sudden there was Cord, wanting to know if I was hurt."

"He probably lurked in that alley ever since the first time, waiting to knock you over again," Rob said.

"Don't be silly. This was years later. After I got back from Chicago. He'd been gone for years too."

Cord had examined the little cat with gentle hands and then told her he would take it home and fix it. She gave the kitten to him, not knowing anything better to do. She often wondered in the years since if he had lied to her, told her he would fix it when he couldn't or wasn't going to bother just to make her feel better - had wondered until last fall, when she saw the same cat in the barn, easy to recognize by the unique white mark on its face.

"I call him Paddy because he's orange and looks sort of Irish to me," she told them seriously. "Cord said he thought about trying to tell me Paddy healed and was fine, but he knew if he talked to me and anybody saw it would cause trouble again. He knew about the other times, you see. There's so much gossip in the town."

Frank pressed for more information. “Do you know where he was those years he was gone from here? What he did?”

“Yes, I do, but those are his stories. If you want to hear them, you’ll have to ask him yourself.”

“He’d never tell us a word, you know. We didn’t know he’d been in Utah or Texas until that day Noah was here after the fight.”

“Maybe you never asked him nicely.”

Frank started to argue, but right then Luke came in, wanting hot water for cleaning Red’s wound. Anne rose from her chair. “I’ll come help.”

Luke gave her his engaging, teasing grin. “No you won’t. Cord says if you don’t stay here and mind your own business, he’ll tell Uncle Eph how to keep a hold of you.”

She shot right back, “You tell him if he tells Ephraim anything of the sort, it will be the last time *he* keeps a hold of me,” but she sat down.

It was not, Luke assured her, a bad or dangerous wound, just ugly from neglect, and the horse seemed quite happy to be rescued from Lennie’s care.

A short while later, Cord and Anne started for home in the buggy, Red trailing along behind with no fuss at all.

The Bennetts discussed what they had learned about their brother. Frank felt his attitude was vindicated. “I knew he’d never have invited her in or tried to help her that day Wells found her there unless there was a reason. Even then, he figured he owed her - from way back when they were kids.”

Ephraim looked at it differently. “It sounds like he *liked* her - from way back when they were kids.”

Frank said cynically, “As much as he likes anyone maybe. You hear the way he talks to her. Does it sound affectionate to you?”

Shaking his head, Ephraim had to concede the point. “No, it sure doesn’t sound affectionate, but I don’t know, Frank, that woman is…. Would she stay with him unless he’s being decent to her?”

Frank had a ready answer to that, one which Ephraim conceded had merit. “Think about how she grew up with Wells for a father. She probably has no idea of how a decent man acts.”

* * *

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Chapter 29

EVEN THOUGH THE VERY THOUGHT of the race made her stomach clench, Anne admitted to herself she was looking forward to the weekend of the race like a child does a birthday. Frank had agreed to send a young cowboy who could milk cows to stay at their house and care for the stock from Friday afternoon until Sunday evening. Billy James showed up right on time, leaving Cord and Anne free for a leisurely ride to town.

Anne rode Red. Cord rode Keeper and led Lady, packed with everything they'd need for the weekend, including Anne's dress for the post-race dance. When Martha showed them to a spare bedroom with two narrow beds, both freshly made up, Anne winked wickedly at Cord. It was a good thing they were both thin, or they'd never fit together in one of those skinny beds.

The next morning, Cord ate no breakfast, drank only one cup of coffee. As Anne refilled her own coffee cup at the stove, Martha whispered her amazement.

"Nothing ever affects his appetite. Surely he's not nervous about this, is he?"

Anne didn't answer but intended her pat on Martha's arm to reassure the older woman. It didn't. Martha began to look nervous herself.

Soon after, the rest of the Bennetts began arriving. Luke and Pete had ridden to town with Riley. Frank brought Judith and the younger children in the carriage. Echoing Cord's brief greetings, Anne put them all out of her mind and followed her husband to the barn. She told herself the sunny, clear day was a good omen, then realized the horse himself was a better one. After two months of zealous grooming and careful conditioning, Red was all but bursting out of his gleaming hide with good health and energy. Anne did the final brushing as Cord buckled protective leather boots on all four legs.

Close to the starting line, with half an hour left before the ten o'clock start time, Anne held Red while Cord worked his way through the crowd. There were fifteen horses entered this year, and he observed each before returning. She questioned him with raised eyebrows.

"Four, I think. Lathrum's sent two really grand looking bay stallions. There's a good chestnut gelding from the Bar S and a classy brown mare from Wyoming."

These were, Anne knew, the four he felt would have the speed and endurance for this grueling contest, the ones that, barring an all

too likely unhappy twist of fate, had the best chance of winning.

As the time for the start grew closer, the family began to show up, surrounding them with partisan good wishes, obviously believing that Cord planned a slow, safe ride through the course, and was only going through the motions. Recognition that something else was going on began to dawn on them when the Bennetts saw one of the Stones' English saddles on the stallion.

It was Gil, too young for caution, who asked, "What's the pimple for?"

Anne knew Cord was less likely to indulge in small talk than usual, and Gil's derogatory reference to the small saddle didn't help. She did the explaining. "Most of the other horses are being ridden by boys or small, lightweight men. That saddle takes more than twenty pounds off Red. He'll still be carrying close to two hundred pounds."

Frank and Ephraim stared at her, understanding spreading across their faces. Going through the motions did not require lightening the horse's load by twenty pounds. Their concerned expressions sharpened after Cord mounted and trotted Red toward the starting line when Anne pulled a small sheaf of bills from her pocket and said, "Luke, do you think you and Pete could bet this for me? On Red to win?"

The two young men had learned their lesson the last time Anne bet on Cord and the red horse. As they walked toward the tables where most of the betting was taking place, Pete could be heard asking Luke, "How much spare cash you got on you?"

Frank asked no one in particular, "What the hell is going on?"

Anne gave him what she hoped was an innocent smile.

For spectators, the best feature of the race was that from a position near the starting line, one could look down into the wash where the worst of the race took place and see everything except parts of the Narrows. Anne worked her way to a good vantage point and then turned to watch the start. The family joined her, a small crowd within the crowd, and then the Stones pushed their way to her side too.

For a seeming eternity, first one horse and then another broke formation at the starting line, until finally all fifteen were aligned for the seconds necessary for the starter to fire his gun. They broke towards the wash in a herd, an indistinguishable blur of shining bay, chestnut, and brown.

Slowly, over the first mile, the group began to string out. As Cord had predicted, Lathrum's leggy bays led the pack. Even as Anne spotted the pretty brown mare and the Bar S chestnut, the mare passed two other horses. Red was definitely last, running

several lengths behind the last of the ten horses in a pack behind the leaders. He seemed to lose even more ground as the animals ahead of him began to run through the overturned trees and deadwood covering the first part of the wash.

By the time Red came to that part of the course, the pack had streamed through, leaving his way clear. He picked his way neatly through the litter strewn trail. One of the horses in the pack ahead was already pulling up lame.

The leaders were now splashing through the treacherous stream bed. The next casualty was the brown mare. She was ridden out of the stream, out of the way of the oncoming riders, barely putting weight on one hind leg.

Anne could not stop a moan from escaping. “Poor pretty brown lady.”

John Stone’s voice came sharp and sarcastic. “Save your sympathy. We’re going to need it.” The Stones must have really believed the lure of keeping the prize money would make Cord forget any scruples he had and push their horse through the course full tilt.

Cord pulled Red down to a walk. The horse picked his way along the stream as if he had all the time in the world and racing was the furthest thing from anyone’s mind. Another of the pack behind the three leaders pulled over, also limping badly.

John Stone’s voice dripped with scorn. “Does he have a theory he can win by attrition?”

Anne pretended not to hear.

The three leaders were out of the part of the course that required staying the stream, running their mounts across firm ground back to the steep bank that descended to the water again. They crossed the stream and were starting up the steep bank of the far side before Cord finished guiding Red carefully through the water-covered hazards. Out of the stream and away from the dangerous footing, he let Red extend into a full run, still far behind all the other racers.

The other riders had all slowed their horses coming into the trees before the descent to the stream bed. Cord did not. He disappeared from sight on the horse’s side, Comanche style, as the horse ran under tree limbs that barely cleared the saddle. He regained his seat only just in time, as Red launched from the bank’s edge in a smooth broad jump. He landed on the far bank with feet to spare, and Cord disappeared from the saddle again until they were past the last of the low-hanging trees on the far bank.

The jump made up half the distance between Red and the last of the eleven horses still in front.

The leaders were now entering the Narrows. First Lathrum's darker bay horse disappeared from sight, then the chestnut gelding, then Lathrum's lighter bay. To enter the Narrows, the horses had to slow considerably, for the course headed between two markers straight for a vertical, undercut bank, then swerved abruptly to the left.

The horses still tightly grouped as if in a second race behind the leaders slowed and aggressively jockeyed for position heading into the turn. One was pushed outside the course markers. This was a disqualification under the rules and left only seven in the group still in the race. The disqualified rider dismounted and kicked at the course marker in disgust.

Cord had again lost ground between his horse and the pack ahead. This time the onlookers could see it was deliberate. There was no mistaking the tight rein, the horse's shaking head as he fought the restraint.

As the last horse ahead of Red disappeared into the Narrows, instead of staying slowed to make the turn, Cord gave the horse more rein. He accelerated smoothly, heading straight for the massive bank at a never slacking pace, angling in to pass between the required course markers. The undercut bank loomed like a cliff as the horse came in under it with no loss of speed.

Anne clenched her fists, leaning forward as if she could help, not caring who heard her whisper, "Now, love, now!"

Muscles bunched and strained in the red horse's haunches as he leapt up in what seemed an impossible jump. Cord's hands, Anne knew, were woven in the mane just behind the horse's ears, his body flattened out along the horse as still as possible. Red's front legs landed well up on top of the bank; his hind legs scrambled for interminable seconds, loosing showers of dirt before he got firm purchase. Then he was up top, in balance again, galloping straight across the plateau that the Narrows wound tortuously around.

Frank's hand was on her shoulder, and there was awe in his voice. "Anne?"

"Wait and see. The worst part is yet to come."

"How high is that bank?"

"Just under six feet." Difficult, but not impossible for a good jumper, and Red was a very good jumper.

The far side of the plateau was the same as the side they had come up. The bank on that side was actually higher, almost seven feet. John Stone asked the obvious question as Cord headed for the opposite bank. "How's he going to get down from there?"

Anne didn't bother responding, as everyone saw the answer. The horse launched off the far bank, descending at a sickening

looking angle, and almost went to his knees on landing, but the ground there was, Anne knew, fairly soft sand.

Red recovered and was off again. It was another hundred yards back to the part of the course where the other horses would emerge from the Narrows. Between Cord and Red and that path was an almost impassable tangle of heavy brush and dead trees. Red jumped the one opening in the otherwise impenetrable wall, a fallen tree that had caught so much debris it made a solid four-foot by four-foot obstacle. He landed only a few strides before the course markers ending the Narrows.

In what Anne knew Cord considered the most difficult maneuver of all, he straightened in the saddle, managing to slow the horse and execute the necessary ninety-degree turn to pass between the markers. He then pulled the horse down to a walk.

Red ambled along with his neck stretched and lowered, shaking himself slightly, looking for all the world like a horse through for the day. There was a mile and a half of uphill run left to the finish line.

Stone almost screamed at Anne. “What the hell’s the matter with him? Surely he didn’t go through all that just to quit now?

She would not have deigned to answer Stone, but the questioning looks from the Bennetts and Frank’s repeated, “Anne?” made her explain.

“He says those three horses in the lead are all faster than Red in a straight run. Red’s exerted just as much effort in those jumps as they have running the longer distance, so the difference will be that right now Red’s getting a few lungsful of air and his heart is getting a little rest. He still isn’t sure he can beat them, but he said if he had this much lead at this point he thought he could. From here on it’s just a horse race.”

As she spoke Red moved into a trot, Cord keeping an eye behind him. When the leading horse came into sight emerging from the Narrows, Cord leaned forward and almost disappeared in the flame-colored mane, and Red took off, running flat out. There was less than a mile and a quarter to go from there to the finish line.

Seeing the red horse ahead of them, the three leading riders gave furious cries. All reached for quirts and began rhythmically lashing their horses on. Near the finish line, the crowd watched in silence as the three gained on the streaking, fiery stallion.

Then Lathrum’s light bay began to fade as if it had hit a wall. The dark bay stallion and chestnut gelding relentlessly closed the distance. The pursuing riders whipped their mounts with every stride. There was no movement at all from Red’s back.

The Bar S chestnut suddenly stopped gaining ground. It would

finish third, slowing all the way. The dark bay stallion was all courage, head extended, eyes rolling white, teeth bared.

Red crossed the finish line not quite two lengths ahead, winning on a few lungsful of air.

The instant Cord crossed the finish line Anne took off running to the place behind one of the houses lining the road where he had promised to wait. He was checking the stallion for cuts or injuries as she flew around the corner and headed straight for him, calling his name.

The heady wine of victory for these few minutes dissolved all his reserve. He lifted her right off the ground in an enthusiastic hug, returning her excited kiss.

"It was beautiful to watch, just beautiful. Was it as beautiful to ride?"

The momentary absence of the impassive mask left his face almost boyish. "No, not beautiful, scary. We went into that bank and all I could think was we measured wrong. Looked more like sixty feet than six. I kept thinking it was the stupidest thing I'd ever done. Then we were up top and jumping off, and I knew, no, *that* was the stupidest thing I'd ever done. If I'd had breakfast I'd have lost it all right then. My stomach was ten feet behind the rest of me."

His eyes were alight with the triumph, warm and full of life. "You just saw my debut and retirement as a race rider, babe. That's it."

The steely self-control slid back into place almost with an audible snap. "We'd better get back out there so they can tell us we cheated and didn't really win."

She gave him a last hug. "You did win. You know it, I know it, and so will they, no matter what they say."

"Sure. How about you lead him ahead, and I'll watch how he goes."

Anne led the horse back to the roadway that was still filled with milling competitors and spectators. Cord walked behind the horse, watching for any signs of lameness. Groups of chattering, gesturing people fell silent at their approach. Obviously they were debating the outcome of the race.

The Stones fell on them almost at once. John had been exultant when the race ended, now he was in a rage. Words boiled out of him. "You realize you didn't win that. You cheated. Everyone says so."

Virginia Stone put her gloved hand on her husband's arm, and tugged slightly, "John, I think…."

Stone turned on his wife. "Shut up, Ginny. You don't think. That's your problem."

White-faced with humiliation, Virginia Stone dropped her hand from his arm and stood rigidly, making no further attempt to participate in the conversation.

Cord ignored the byplay between the couple and answered the accusation thrown at him. “No, Mr. Stone, if you read the rules, I didn’t cheat. You have to pass through all the markers and you can’t turn back and pick them up if you miss them. There are no markers in the Narrows.”

“I suppose you expect me to go up to the race committee and try to convince them of that and get you your thousand dollars.”

Cord’s voice was so soft it was almost inaudible. “No, I expect you to agree with them that Lathrum’s bay won. Maybe they’ll let you give him the check.”

He turned to Mrs. Stone and nodded slightly. “Annie and I’ll take care of the horse and leave him in your barn, ma’am. Looks like he won’t even be sore in the morning.”

Martha and Ephraim, Frank and Judith had arrived in time to hear everything Stone had to say. Ephraim watched his brother and Anne just walk away, one on each side of the horse. Cord had ridden that race knowing this would be the outcome and done it anyway, and Anne had helped him. Instead of letting her temper loose, she had turned her back on both the Stones and her husband’s family as quietly as Cord had, knowing there would be neither support nor congratulations from either. Ephraim felt an unexpected outrage.

He turned on Stone. “John, for a so-called gentleman, you are a first-class bastard.”

Ephraim hurried to the wooden stand draped in gaudy red and white bunting where the race committee had watched the race. He wasn’t even close when he heard shouting.

Jowly, paunchy, and balding, Alferd Lathrum wasn’t an attractive man under any circumstances. Red-faced and shouting at the committee members at the top of his lungs he was downright ugly. As Ephraim walked up, he realized that if the committee had been inclined to award Lathrum the race at first, they just might be having second thoughts by now.

Seeing Ephraim approaching and recognizing Cord’s brother, Lathrum changed targets.

“That redskin brother of yours cheated,” he screamed. “He broke the rules. He didn’t follow the course.”

Ephraim did his lawyerly best to project calm and reason. “The rules are very clear, and it’s obvious to anyone who can read he didn’t break any of them, Mr. Lathrum. Are you trying to intimidate the committee with this performance?”

The committee had, in fact, had quite enough of Alferd Lathrum. The mayor, who was chairman of the committee, finally finding room to get a word in, asserted his authority.

"Precisely, Mr. Lathrum. If you would just leave the stand, perhaps we can review the facts and come to a decision."

At this point John Stone put in a belated and truculent appearance. Prize money or not, the legitimate winner of this race would be easier to sell than a disqualified also ran. Still stiff with anger, and avoiding looking at Ephraim, Stone arrogantly stated his case.

"Gentlemen, I have just reviewed your rules, and I see no basis for disqualifying my wife's horse. If you do, perhaps Mr. Bennett here would agree to represent my wife and me in a lawsuit against the committee."

The mayor raked his fingers through his hair. "Mr. Stone, Mr. Bennett, Mr. Lathrum, if you would please leave us for a few minutes, we need to discuss this, and then we'll announce our decision."

Walking away beside Cord, Anne heard her name and Cord's and turned to see Martha hurrying after them. After catching her breath, Martha said, "Why don't you wait a minute and see what happens. Ephraim's gone to talk to the committee."

Anne glanced at Cord and saw he was as surprised as she was. They had never considered support from his family. As they turned and walked back to the rest of the family with Martha, the mayor announced the results of the race through a bull horn. Mrs. John Stone's horse, Firebrand, was the winner. Anne laughed, and since hugging Cord in front of hundreds of people was out, hugged Martha, then the horse.

Lennie appeared out of the crowd. "They want that horse to put a wreath around. They're even going to take a photograph."

Red was busy exploring Anne's pockets, looking for carrots, and happily munched away when she produced one.

Cord handed Lennie the reins. "Take him on up there then."

Lennie showed first surprise, then uncertainty as he found himself holding his old enemy, but he led the stallion towards the stand and a share of glory.

Frank chuckled and said, "Don't want your picture taken?"

"Nope." Cord leaned against a low fence fronting the house they had stopped by. They were suddenly surrounded by an enthusiastic group of race watchers. Armand and Helene LeClerc arrived first. Reaching only midway on Cord's chest when he was standing, Helene took advantage of his half-sitting position against the fence and took him by the shoulders and kissed him on both

cheeks. Emerging from Armand's bear hug, Anne wondered if her husband could possibly be blushing.

Cord also received congratulatory handshakes from Noah Reynolds, Riley, James Miles, Dr. Craig, and several people who had bought horses from him in the last year or two. Bob Windon was there, grin firmly in place, foregoing any remarks about magic for once.

Anne received a hug from her mother, who avoided Cord. Rob was escorting his mother as usual, but hung silently in the background.

The noisy crowd quieted as a tall, spare man, darker than Cord, with a large drooping mustache, and dressed in distinctly Spanish style clothes approached. This was Raoul Zamora, Alferd Lathrum's head horseman. Zamora stopped in front of Cord, nodded his head slightly, then extended his hand.

As he shook hands, Raoul said, "Ever since you rode the palomino horse back to the ranch, I wondered. Today, I know. It was an honor to witness such a ride."

Cord tugged an ear, a glint in his eyes. "If that jockey of yours had laid off the quirt, your bay horse might have caught us."

Raoul made a dismissive gesture with both hands. "Few men have your control. It is too much to expect. Today was yours."

Cord just nodded. Raoul turned half away then back. "I hear the colt is still alive. Is this true?"

Cord nodded again. "My wife talked him into living. Anne, meet Raoul Zamora. Raoul, this is my wife, Anne Bennett."

The almost black eyes studied her. "Mrs. Bennett. Another honor for me today." He gave a small bow in her direction, then addressed Cord again. "The dark bay horse is a full brother to your colt. You might like to know that. Your colt is better." He was gone then, disappearing into the crowd.

Anne watched him go. "Why does a man like that work for Lathrum?"

"He's got a wife and six kids, and they all like to eat. Not too many riding jobs around pay that well."

"Does he mean Fortune is a full brother to the bay that wouldn't quit?"

"Yup." There was a grin in his eyes. "Like an extra Christmas present in July, isn't it, Ti-gress?"

When Lennie returned with Red, happy to leave the work of tending to the sweat soaked and tired horse to someone else, the small victory party broke up.

AN HOUR LATER, CORD WAS making up for the missed breakfast

over lunch at Ephraim's, and Martha was laughing. "I was worried when you didn't eat this morning, you know. It's not like you."

"Would have lost it coming off that bank, Marty."

"I know that's what it was now."

Not looking up from his lunch, Cord said, "'Preciate your talking to the committee, Eph. Didn't figure on coming out of that the official winner, but people would know that's a hell of a nice horse anyway."

"I suppose you practiced every one of those jumps and maneuvers somehow."

"Sure, started with little two footers months ago."

"And how did you approximate that bank?"

"Found something close over on the main ranch. Took a little digging here and there is all."

"That's all," echoed Ephraim. "It must have taken a lot of time every day then."

"Not too bad. Annie did all the grooming and put the flat miles on while I rode colts. Kept me from getting behind with the young stock. She helped get the timing on takeoffs right too - I've never done much jumping."

Cord looked up to see Ephraim looking at him intently.

"It surprised me how angry I was at the thought of them getting away with cheating you out of the win," Ephraim said. "Zamora was right, it was an honor to watch that ride."

Cord looked at his brother warily, recognizing the first tentative step toward a major rapprochement.

Ephraim dropped his eyes. "Anyway, I probably wouldn't have done much good with the committee if Stone hadn't come right behind me." He chuckled. "He threatened to hire me to sue them."

Cord returned to his lunch. "If you hadn't gone over there first, he never would have. Thanks."

Right then Luke and Pete burst into the kitchen. "Boy, I hope you saved some for us."

Martha said, "You know I did. Where have you two been?"

"Oh, here and there." They'd been sampling drinks at some of the post-race get togethers and everyone knew it.

"Oh, yeah, before I forget. I don't want to carry all this around any more." Luke began pulling great wads of bills from his pockets and throwing them on the table in front of Anne.

Anne watched the growing pile of bills and recognized trouble. "W-what's that?" she asked.

"Your take."

"Take?"

"From your bet. You gave us a hundred dollars."

"But that's - that's thousands."

"For gosh sakes, Anne, we explained about odds last time. The odds were twenty to one. You won two thousand dollars. This time Pete and I got smart. We each bet twenty dollars, and I happen to know Sheriff Reynolds did too. LeClercs bet ten, and so did Mr. Miles. Everybody had a great day courtesy of our uncle. And the horse, of course." Luke was slightly tipsy and enjoying himself even more than usual.

Anne was afraid to even look up. "You s-shouldn't have done that," she said. "I thought Red would probably be disqualified, and it wouldn't have mattered if I lost the money."

As a matter of fact she had thought losing her Grenerton money might be a good thing.

Luke just laughed, but Anne's heart sank as she heard Cord drawl, "Well, isn't that great, Ti-gress. Now you don't have to stop in Denver, you can head straight for Paris - or wherever." He was furious, and what might have come of it she was just as glad not to know, for missing the undercurrents, Pete spoke up.

"We heard that poor horse isn't going anywhere as nice as Paris. Lathrum's going to buy him."

Anne jerked her head up and met Cord's eyes. What she saw there only reflected her own pain. Lathrum was a cruel man even without a reason, and he had a reason to vent his spleen on Red - he would see the horse as the weapon used to best him. Anne was afraid she was going to cry right here in front of everyone. Looking down, trying to keep the tears from starting, she saw the blur of green. "Cord, could we…?"

"Even if it's enough, they won't sell that horse to us."

"If we never try…."

"Stone won't just say no. He'll rub our noses in it."

A single tear slipped across her cheek. Cord conceded defeat by standing and starting for the door. "All right, money bags, gather it up and come on. We'll make them say no."

Anne gathered up the bills and tried to smooth them out and roll them neatly then hurried after him.

John Stone was not at home. A maid escorted them into the library where Virginia Stone waited. "I suppose you've come for your prize money." There was a rectangular-shaped piece of paper on the desk before her.

Anne poked a finger in Cord's back, wanting him to do the talking. He shot her a hard look but answered. "No, ma'am. We heard Mr. Lathrum was trying to buy your horse and wondered if you'd sold to him."

"No, as a matter of fact. He came here and discussed it, but I've

promised John to sell the horse to the first person who offers what I paid, which is twenty-five hundred dollars, and Mr. Lathrum offered considerably less and wanted to negotiate. I told him he would have to speak with John - who is in town 'celebrating' with friends."

Resentment was in her voice and around her mouth. "Mr. Lathrum went to look for him. I imagine John will accept something less in the end. He really hates that horse." She pressed hand to her forehead. "I bought him when John wasn't with me, you know. He can't forgive that." She jerked upright, as if reminded of what she was saying and to whom she was saying it. "Well, that's neither here nor there. I'll endorse this check to you."

Cord said, "Mrs. Stone, would you sell Anne the horse?"

Something that looked remarkably like regret crossed her face. "I'm sorry, Mr. Bennett, I can't take this check and your note. My husband has specified cash, you see."

"We had in mind that check and fifteen hundred dollars cash."

Wide-eyed with disbelief, the quintessential lady crossed the boundaries of propriety a second time. "Where on earth would you get fifteen hundred dollars?"

Anne might have replied that they had just robbed the local bank, but Cord's self-restraint was much better. He said, "Anne bet on the race. The odds were twenty to one."

Mrs. Stone dropped to the chair behind the desk, a genuine laugh ringing out. "Oh, my, John's going to love it. Just love it. The bill of sale for the horse is in my name alone. I'll just write another and attach it. His pedigree is with it. You can have the lot."

"We wouldn't want to cause you any trouble, ma'am." Anne could have wrung his neck for that.

"Oh, no, I gave John my word to accept the first offer of as much as I paid. One's word is one's bond, you know." The opportunity to spite her husband was making her almost giddy.

Anne counted fifteen hundred dollars from her pockets onto the desk, and then spoke for the first time. "Please make the bill of sale out to Cord and Anne Bennett, Mrs. Stone."

Busy writing, Virginia Stone missed the hard look Cord gave Anne. He said nothing, just folded the papers and buttoned them in his shirt pocket.

Still happy over her domestic revenge, Virginia Stone shook both their hands. "It's been a pleasure." She laughed again. "A real pleasure."

Cord and Anne walked in silence to the barn. There was no sign of Lennie. "What are you going to use for Grenerton money, Annie?"

She put her hands on his shoulders and examined his face bit by bit. His eyes were as devoid of expression as his face itself. "If I ever

decide to go to Grenerton, I'll just ask you to take me. That way you'll be right there, ready to take me home when I've seen enough." His hands tightened on her waist. He said nothing. "You know I'm never going there or anywhere else as well as I do. You're just not ready to admit it."

"Guess you've still got five hundred left, and you could always sell your horse. You could probably get to San Francisco." He took his hands away.

They walked through the town as before, wordlessly, one on each side of the horse. After seeing to the stallion, safe in Ephraim's barn, Anne again put her hands on his shoulders. "Will you do me a favor, please?"

She could feel withdrawal in his every muscle. "Like what?"

"I bet on that race thinking the money probably would be lost, and that would be just as well because it bothered you, but I also knew how much work we did, and I thought if I did win, that was fine too because I was betting on *us*. Will you stop referring to 'my money,' and 'my horse?' Please? Could you manage 'our money' and 'our horse?'"

She felt him relax under her hands. "All right. Let's go tell them about our new horse."

* * *

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Chapter 30

CORD HAD NOT BEEN INSIDE the Mason town hall since he had followed Marie out one of its doors the night she was attacked years ago. Now he was doing the same thing he had been doing that night, sitting along one wall watching others dance. When Anne had asked him about attending the social, with her own desire to attend written all over her face, he had been unable to say no, a mistake for which he was now paying.

She had chosen a pale yellow gown trimmed with green from her Chicago dresses, and was having a grand time dancing with what seemed to Cord to be every man in the place. The whole thing was absolutely his own fault.

He had answered her inquiry with, “I don’t dance.” He had told her to go ahead and have a good time, he was fine where he was. And after every dance she came to sit beside him for a while, although her happy chatter had tailed off more quickly during each visit.

He knew his own black mood was affecting her, knew he was being unreasonable, and couldn’t stop himself. Watching her now her as she spun round, laughing up at Noah Reynolds, he glared at the sheriff’s hands on her and wanted to hit something. Anne looked like sunlight dancing on water - dancing with another man.

Miss Maggie Powers, whose piano provided the music, was a romantic at heart, and she had been ending the town’s the dances with a long waltz even when Cord was a boy. Noah returned Anne to his side, and Cord knew that last waltz was not far off and knew he was not watching her dance it with someone else.

“Suppose we leave now before the crowd?” he said.

Anne was more than happy to leave early. The evening had been pleasant enough, but dancing with family and friends while wondering why her husband was becoming stonier by the minute was not exactly what she had hoped for.

To her surprise, outside the hall she felt his hand on her elbow, guiding her not up the street towards Ephraim’s but around behind the hall where a flat grassy area separated the hall from the cemetery and the church beyond. Through the open windows she could hear the first notes of Miss Maggie’s last waltz.

“Dance with me, Annie?”

Did he want to learn here and now? Unsure, she placed a hand on his shoulder, and then Cord gathered her up and swooped her away. I should have known she thought. “You said you couldn’t dance.”

"I said I *don't* dance. Hannah and Martha used me to teach Marie, but I haven't tried it since Marie's wedding. You know what would happen if we danced in there."

He guided her through the velvety summer darkness in silence. This was dancing as she had never before experienced it.

Anne floated effortlessly through the warm night, carried by raw male power and grace. This was not just a dance, but a prelude, and the heat of his hands on her flesh was but a hint, a promise of raging fire to come. Her pulse quickened, breathing felt exaggerated. She brushed against him with every step, leaving nerve endings tingling, awareness heightened.

The new moon was only a sliver of light, and close as they were she could hardly discern his features. He was a sensuous ghost, yet he was her husband, her lover, her friend. Anne wondered if he knew, felt any part of what she felt. As the last notes from the piano died, she was answered when he pulled her full against him and left her weak in his arms with a searing kiss.

They walked through the night hand in hand, but arrived at Ephraim's only minutes before the rest of the family. An hour later, Anne was in one of the narrow beds in Martha's spare room, alone, biting her lower lip, unsure whether she was stopping herself from crying or shrieking.

Martha had explained the rearranged sleeping arrangements with no sign that she realized she was ruining anyone's night.

"Now that the whole family's here, I've put a cot for Beth in your room, Anne. Judith will be in the other bed. Frank and the boys will share the other spare rooms."

"What about Cord?" Anne asked.

"Oh, he can't stand to be squeezed in with the rest. He always makes a bed for himself in the parlor. Didn't he tell you?" Martha said blithely.

No, he hadn't, and from the look of him, Anne knew he hadn't been thinking about the changed sleeping arrangements tonight and wasn't any happier about it than she was.

Cord lay wide awake in his makeshift bed on the parlor floor in such a rage he was only barely controlling an urge to smash things. If he had any sense of humor left at all, the comical dismay on his wife's face when she saw the sleeping arrangements might have amused him, but he was quite beyond humor.

How the hell had he let himself forget about how much squeezing it took to fit the whole family in here overnight? He had slept on this floor many times over the years, and it had never before seemed so hard or so unyielding. He wondered seriously what would happen if he stormed upstairs, snatched his wife from

her narrow, pristine bed and carried her off into the summer night.

He ought to get up, make himself some coffee, read something off of Ephraim's shelves, pass the night somehow. Instead, he lay perfectly still, listening to his own blood pounding in his ears, sexual tension and fury creating a more and more volatile mixture. He could get up and walk through the town. Of course, he'd get into the first fight he came across - start one probably.

Slight rustling sounds from the staircase caught his attention. A white apparition moved slowly towards him. She was feeling her way cautiously from one piece of furniture to another. Anne's bare feet were at the edge of his blanket bed before he was sure who it was, and even then he still thought his heated imagination might have conjured her up.

He saw the white nightgown rise then flutter to the floor. Cord didn't move, was not sure he could until he heard the soft words, "Cord? Are you awake? Please be awake."

Anne began sliding under the blankets beside him then, and as her silken leg slid along the taut muscles of his, Cord came to life with all the bottled up fury of the last hours, seizing her, rolling her under his weight, his mouth hungry, demanding.

Anne was surprised, but only for an instant. As time had passed, she had lain awake in the narrow bed upstairs, aching from head to toe for his touch, waiting for Judith and Beth to stop talking and go to sleep so that she could sneak out of the bedroom and down the stairs. She began to be afraid that he would be asleep, that she would have to endure the fever of the night alone.

By the time the house was quiet, her skin was on fire; her very bones ached. She crept to the stairs on ridiculously shaky legs, unsure if she could negotiate the steps. The soft cloth of the nightgown tortured her sensitized skin.

Now she kissed him back with an equal abandon, whimpering with relief at finding a need as great as her own. She loved the feel of his hands and mouth on her, often thought she could never get enough of the gentle caresses, but not tonight. Tonight her need was immediate and consuming. She could feel him hard and ready against her thigh. Her leg slipped up, letting him feel her own swollen, moist warmth.

Anne heard a deep throaty sound from her always silent husband, half groan, half growl, as he responded by shifting his body and entering her. In all their months together he had never been anything but gentle, but this coupling would have been too rough, too fierce, if she were not as frenzied as he. He drove into her, and she met each thrust with all her strength. With legs, arms, and mouth she tried to hold and envelop as much of him as

possible, arched upwards frantically, trying to take him deeper with every stroke. She locked her legs around him, dug her hands into his surging back muscles and felt him pulling her breath away.

She tried to smother the sounds of pleasure she couldn't suppress against his face and neck as a climax as violent as their coupling swept through her. She heard another low growl as he shuddered, then her name. She held him in her as long as she could, sighed softly when he shifted his weight from her.

Neither of them moved again until the cooling summer night made Anne shiver slightly. Cord cradled her against his chest, pulled the blanket over her and tucked it under her chin. "You all right?"

"More than all right. Lovely." Anne brushed her fingers over his cheekbone, across his mouth. He kissed her palm.

"I thought they'd never go to sleep. I wanted you so much it *hurt*."

His arms tightened around her, holding her hard.

After the long, full day, Anne drifted off to sleep moments later.

Cord fought sleep, wanting to savor this moment and the memories of the day. Anne's breath fanned across his throat sweetly. *I wanted you so much it hurt*. She made him feel like the king he was sure she had been born for. He thought of her face as she ran into his arms after the race, the feel of her in his arms dancing in the summer night. Perhaps there would never again be such a day, but he had this one. And he had her - now.

As he finally stopped fighting sleep, he wondered if maybe just occasionally the gods designed a woman fit for a king or a prince and then gave her to an ordinary man. Maybe they did such a thing once in a while, knowing an ordinary man would treasure her more, love her better. Maybe they even let him keep her - for a while.

* * *

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Chapter 31

SHAPES AND OUTLINES WERE ONLY just appearing in different shades of gray with the first pre-dawn light when Cord awoke. The contentment of the night before still gripped him, but the sight of Anne's bare shoulders, half curtained with silky strands of brown hair, banished the ease immediately. There were other early risers in this house, and he didn't want them finding her here like this. If she woke, she would fuss or even refuse to go.

He untangled himself from her and pulled on his trousers. Forcing himself not to hurry, he eased her nightgown back on. Petting her and murmuring softly to keep her lulled in sleep, he scooped her up and headed for the stairs. She nestled against his shoulder, whispering his name in her sleep. The door to the bedroom she was supposed to be in was ajar. He pushed it slowly wide and carried her in.

A quick check showed Judith in the second bed and Beth in her cot, both still asleep. Relaxing a little, he lowered Anne to the bed, stroking her face and murmuring so softly the words were mere vibrations in his throat. Tucking the sheet up around her, he could not resist one last caress, and slowly ran his fingers along the curve of her cheekbone and then back around the delicate, clean-cut jawline.

At last he straightened and turned to leave, only to see that Judith was now awake and staring at him wide-eyed. He stiffened and froze in place. Judith's fear was intense and totally irrational. He waited for a scream or flight. Neither of them moved or blinked for long tense seconds. He broke the tableau by forcing himself to take a careful sidestep toward the door. A faint smile appeared on Judith's pale features, totally disconcerting him. He gave her a jerky, respectful nod and got the hell out of there.

Back downstairs, he took several deep, slow breaths before his heart began to slow to normal. Impossible that he had walked out of that room without a scene, but he had. Of course, she would probably regale the whole house with the incident over breakfast.

After seeing to feed and water for all the horses, Cord walked back into the house to the smell of fresh-brewed coffee and the sight of Frank at the kitchen table reading one of Ephraim's papers. He helped himself to the coffee and sat down across from his brother.

Frank put the paper aside and looked up. "You feed everything?"

"Sure."

Frank studied him a while, a rare uncertainty on his face. Cord

knew something was eating at Frank. It had been written all over him yesterday. He waited.

"Any chance if I ask you something I'd really like to know, you'd take the trouble to answer?"

Strange way to start. "Depends on what, I suppose."

"Boggs. I'd really like to know what happened."

After all these years. It might have mattered, might have made a difference - once. "Long time ago, can't matter much now."

"It matters to me. I'd really like to know. Maybe a good part was my fault. I should have fired him the day I realized he was a hater, but I was still so damn mad at you for just showing up like that after all those years, looking like that, acting as if it didn't matter, as if you'd only been gone days or something…." Frank took a big gulp of coffee and got up to refill his cup, the movement a patent excuse to regain control. His voice had been rising. It did still matter to him.

Cord sighed. "Frank, we weren't getting along before I left. Seemed at the time you'd all be better off without me around. I never thought it would bother you that much."

"Bother us? For five years there wasn't a time Eph and I talked, a letter from Marie or Hannah that we didn't wonder where you were, how you were, if you were dead and in an unmarked grave and we'd never know. Did you really think we didn't care?"

"I knew you cared, just seemed it would be easier over a distance. Maybe it even was. You can't say I'm not a constant source of aggravation living close either, can you?"

Frank stared, considering the thought. "No, I suppose I can't, but at least we'll know where you're buried. There are even times I can hardly wait." This last was said with a wry half smile pulling at one corner of his mouth. "Why'd you turn Injun when you were gone?"

"I didn't. I like the moccasins is all. The hair - the only way to get a haircut most of the time was to stick a gun under some barber's chin, and I got tired of it. Turner here in town only cuts my hair because of the family, you know. He hates every minute of it."

Cord volunteered no more. The kitchen would soon be full of people, and he hoped Frank would let it go, but the need to know was burning in Frank. He asked again, "Will you tell me about Boggs?"

In truth Cord had a deep love and considerable respect for his brother, even if they couldn't get along well enough to exchange more than two consecutive civil sentences. Without looking up, he answered in a low voice, "You remember what he was on about that day?"

“No, he was always riding you about something. I remember we were putting in the fence between your place and mine, and it was hot. Whatever he was going on about didn’t seem to be any worse than usual.”

“It wasn’t, the talk part anyway.” Resigned now, Cord began to tell his brother what he didn’t know about the Boggs fight.

“He started in that day about how the Comanche slit the nostrils on their best horses because they think they can breathe better at a run that way.”

“How the hell would you know about that?” Frank asked.

“That wasn’t the point, and you know it.”

“No, it wasn’t,” Frank admitted. “Maybe now that you say that, I do remember some of it. I guess I felt like you deserved it.”

“Maybe I did, but Keeper didn’t. When I went to give him water at noon he was tied there half crazy, with both nostrils slit to the bone. The blood was drying so he could barely breathe, or maybe it was the inch-thick layer of flies he couldn’t breathe through.”

“Jesus.”

“Yeah. I cleaned him up enough with canteen water so he could breathe again. He was so bad I couldn’t ride him. Had to tie my shirt over his head and walk him home, and then had to throw him and sit on his head to do the stitching. He was afraid of me for months after. Still doesn’t like anybody touching his nose, even Anne.”

“Even so. You can’t think it’s worth killing a man over.”

“I wasn’t going to kill him, but that day I was as crazy as the horse. Maybe listening to him for those weeks instead of shutting him up at the beginning was part of it. When I went back and you were both gone it just made me madder.”

“So you came looking for him at my place, half killed him, and when I tried to stop you from finishing him off, you turned on me.”

“I was just getting you out of the way. I wasn’t going to kill him, but I wasn’t finished with him either. Afterwards, I was glad Eph showed up and buffaloed me. You weren’t in any real danger, but I might have gone too far with him, and he sure wasn’t worth hanging over.”

Frank had a blank look on his face, eyes turned inward, remembering. “You expect me to believe you’d have laid off me?”

“No, I guess I don’t expect you to believe it, but that’s the way it was. You wouldn’t have felt too good for a while, but then I guess you didn’t anyway.”

Voice faint and still withdrawn, Frank said, “I wish I could believe that. I wish I did believe it, but I guess I don’t.”

On his feet, halfway to the door, Cord felt an unusual surge of anger and faced his brother again. “Did you ever think, if what you

believe about me is true, you ought to do the world a favor and pull your damn gun and blow my brains all over this kitchen? If *half* what you believe is true, you ought to keep me in a cage and sell tickets."

He was gone then, as quiet as always, but somehow Frank felt as if he'd slammed the door leaving.

With his head buried in his hands, Frank didn't realize Ephraim was in the kitchen until he spoke. "For a minute there, I thought you'd have him yelling like a real Bennett."

Frank watched Ephraim help himself to coffee. "How much did you hear?"

"All of it, I think. I came when you were talking about him being gone those five years. It wasn't that I wanted to eavesdrop, but I figured he might clam up on you if I stuck my nose in. He's getting positively chatty lately, don't you think?"

"Do you believe it?"

"Yes, I do."

"Why? You didn't feel that way at the time or you wouldn't have clubbed him off me."

"I guess it was the fight this spring that changed my mind. Anne just pulled on his arm and he stopped. It took him a while to calm down, but when I thought it over, he didn't seem much like a crazed killer that day. We all made up our minds years ago over Hatch, and maybe we were wrong. Did you ever think what you would have done to Hatch, or what I would? If we hadn't had a gun handy, that is?"

Frank ran his fingers through his hair, unable to answer.

"I'll tell you something else I spent some time thinking over after that day, and that's some of the things Anne said. If someone grabbed Judith like that, or Martha, we'd have all taken a hand, but because it was him, we stood and watched like it was a circus or something. Why didn't we help him? So what if we knew he could handle them? So what if you kept him from getting shot - that's all we did. Why'd we make him fight them alone and then act disgusted because he did some permanent damage? I've been doing a lot of thinking, Frank, and maybe he's wrong, he won't explain, won't talk, but we're wrong too - about a lot of things."

Martha came into the kitchen then, and after one quick glance at her husband, moved quietly around, starting breakfast. Judith and Beth weren't long behind, but Frank didn't care what they overheard.

"You think he's changed, don't you, Eph? Think he's gentled with having the woman?"

Ephraim fiddled with his empty cup, then said, "No, actually, I

don't. I think that because she's around we're seeing more of him and more of other sides of him that have always been there. Sometimes you get so wrapped up in the ranch you don't pay much attention to what's going on around you, and you aren't in town all the time like we are, so maybe you don't hear some things. Did you know that the day of the fight he stopped and talked to Noah on the way home, that ever since he stops by the sheriff's office on those walks of his, and if Noah is around they sit and jaw a while? Noah even told me he's stopped by the ranch a couple of times when he was out that way. He's had dinner with them once or twice. LeClercs have been out there too, and Windon takes his family along when he visits now Anne's there."

Frank knew if Ephraim said so, it was true, but he could barely credit his ears. "No - the way Noah talked that day, that's pretty hard to believe."

"Noah told me he hasn't changed his mind about how dangerous our little brother is, just about who he's dangerous to. And have you noticed any changes in Pete and Luke in the last month or so?"

"Sure. They're finally showing some signs of sense, growing up as hard and slow as I did, I guess."

"There's probably some truth in that, but they've also been spending considerable time around Cord. That means instead of heading out of here Sundays for a back room poker game and booze, they're playing with Windon for pennies and drinking water or coffee. You know Cord's a prude about liquor. Pete told me he's decided he's not playing high stakes poker any more until he can figure out when Cord's bluffing more than half the time." Eph grinned suddenly. "That means he'll never play for more than pennies again in his life."

This information unsettled Frank so much he couldn't answer until after he got up, walked the length of the room and back and sat down again. Finally, "I'm not sure I like those two around him that much. I suppose that's why they're sneaking at it."

"They're not sneaking. They've walked out of here bold as brass on his heels most Sundays since that first time they went after Stones' horse with him. They've been visiting the old house too. Pete told me a couple of weeks ago he's not getting married until he can find somebody as spunky as Anne. I told him he'd better reconsider that one."

"My God. You know she's in love with him, or thinks she is."

"It's written all over her."

"He treats her like dirt."

"You exaggerate, and if she's happy, why argue with it? She's

not the only woman who ever loved a man who doesn't love back."

"She deserves better."

"It's not like he stole her from something better, or like there's something better waiting for her. You're probably right, she's a convenience to him, but she's content, and I can't bring myself to begrudge him whatever comfort she brings. Did you ever think about how alone he's been?"

Frank was still just shaking his head when Luke and Pete walked into the kitchen, and his questions about their recent activities ended the conversation between the brothers.

ANNE WAS THE LAST UP and dressed. Told only that Cord had "gone out," she went to the barn looking for him, finding him grooming Red. Her cheery, "Good morning," brought only a grunt.

"I came out here hoping for a good morning kiss. I suppose I'm out of luck."

"Suppose you'll pester till you get what you want."

"Are you angry with me because I didn't wake up and you had to take me back to bed?"

His hands stopped moving, so she ducked between his arms and faced him. "You're right. If you want rid of me, the fastest way would be to give me my kiss and send me on my way, even if you are mad."

"I'm not mad at you. Frank and I had words is all."

"Ah, so you and Frank argued, and he's in the house looking as carefree as ever, wrapped around a cup of coffee, and you're out here by yourself in a temper."

The flat, tight look began to leave his face. "Mm. He's in the house wrapped around a cup of coffee, and I'm out here, wrapped around you." His arms tightened, causing a little shiver of delight as her stomach met his, breasts flattened against his chest. Just before his lips touched hers, she heard him murmur, "Pore ole Frank."

When his mouth left hers and began nuzzling below her ear and down her throat, she laughed and tried to imitate his baritone drawl, "Yes, pore ole Frank."

When he faced her again the hard look had totally vanished.

"Now that I've gotten what I wanted, I'll go," she offered.

"Now that you've ruined my mad, how about sticking around and leading this horse out for me. Let's see if there's any stiffness or soreness."

Pleased at having enticed him out of his dark mood, she happily complied.

Anne enjoyed the rest of that Sunday more than any previous time around Cord's family. Winning the race, buying Red, and her

secret time with Cord last night were the only reasons she told herself. She was helping with the dinner dishes when Martha answered the door and her brother burst into the kitchen, obviously incensed over something. Anne decided to ignore him. Maybe he would say something so offensive Cord would pick him up and throw him out.

The volume and tone of Rob's first words made that likely.

"Is it true?" Rob yelled at Cord. "Is it true what I heard?"

Cord had been leaving the kitchen and stopped in the doorway. "If it's about me, and if it's got you that riled, it's probably true," he said.

"I heard my sister won *thousands* of dollars on that race, and you spent it to buy that horse for yourself. You could have built a decent house instead of having her live in that hovel of yours. You could have gotten decent furniture, or let her spend it on clothes, or keep it for herself. Didn't it ever occur to you to let her keep it?"

As Cord folded his arms across his chest, Rob threw Anne a frantic look. She very deliberately turned her back and put the plate she had been drying away. If Rob wanted to continue being so pigheaded, he could just pay the price.

By the time she turned back around, however, she could see that Cord wasn't going to throw Rob out. He was going to give her brother a different kind of hard time.

"I've got to tell you, Rob, it did cross my mind," Cord said. "There were all those piles of bills on the table, and I thought, I could build a decent house instead of making Annie live in my hovel; I could buy all sorts of fancy furniture for the hovel instead of letting her get splinters in her ass from what's there. I could let her buy another fifty dresses to help the ones already there bulge through the doors on the hovel. Then I thought, what do I care if that woman's got splinters in her ass? And I took the money and went and bought me a rich man's horse."

Rob stood in the middle of the kitchen, his mouth half open.

Anne decided to chime in after all. "Actually, Rob, our house is the nicest place I've ever lived, and if he wanted to build something else, I'd argue. And our furniture might not be fancy, but it's sturdy and attractive, and I don't want anything else. I've got better things to do nowadays than spend my time polishing antiques. And he's right, I have more dresses than I'll ever wear for the rest of my life. I'm the one who wanted to buy the horse. You see, the problem I had was that ever since we've been married he's wanted to send me off as far as I had money to go. When I had twenty dollars, he kept talking about Grenerton. When I had a hundred dollars, he started in about Denver, and there I was with thousands, and he started in

about *France*. I figured if I couldn't get rid of that money fast, he'd start in about China, or Africa or someplace."

Cord walked back to the table, turned a chair around and straddled it, crossing his arms on the back. "Been giving it some more thought. The best place to send you would be somewhere where they keep women in walled gardens with guards, where women have to wear veils all the time, and where every man gets a hundred wives. You could be some man's hundred and first wife, Tigress."

"Oh, my, how about if I just promise to be good?"

He looked at her intently for a moment, "Why don't you just go outside and spit in the wind?"

Uttered without expression, it sounded ugly, and Anne saw the frowns on Bennett faces, but as Cord left the kitchen, she met Rob's eyes and saw understanding there. Her brother might be stubborn, but he wasn't stupid, and he knew her better than her husband's family did. Rob had just realized that Cord had first teased him about the horse and then teased her about the money and any promise she might make to be "good." She knew Rob's ideas about her husband and her marriage had just been shaken to the core and wondered if it would ever make any difference.

* * *

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Chapter 32

ANNE UNDERSTOOD THAT THE MOST important work of the year on the ranch was haying in late summer. If every available nook and cranny of the ranch buildings were stuffed with hay going into the winter, there was enough to ensure that the horses had supplemental feed on the poor winter pasture and came through the snows fat and sassy. It guaranteed that the broodmares were strong in early spring for foaling and that they could produce healthy foals and lots of milk to keep them healthy.

She also knew the season only lasted a few weeks, starting when the grasses in the hill meadows on the ranch were ripe enough to cut, and ending when they matured to overripe, tasteless stalks. That meant there would be no church on Sunday, which was more than all right with her. In fact a few weeks without any aggravation from her family or from the Bennetts and without having to control herself around Reverend Yellow-Belly sounded more than all right.

So at first Anne cooperated with Cord's plans for hay season. She stayed home, took care of the livestock and did the milking and other chores. However, after three days of watching Cord rise in darkness still stiff from the previous day's work and come home at night after dark almost too tired to wash in the creek and eat before falling into bed, she had had enough. On the fourth day she rode Red to the hay meadows. There had to be something she could do. "Why can't I drive the hay rake?" she asked. "That looks easy."

"If you fell off and the tines got you, they'd rip you to pieces."

"Why should I be silly enough to fall in front of the tines? If *you* fell off that way *you'd* be ripped to pieces."

Cord gave in as she'd known he would. By the end of the week they had a routine established. He rose before first light and was in the fields by daybreak. Anne took care of the livestock, did anything else that couldn't wait in the house or garden, packed a lunch, and followed him to the fields on Red.

He did the cutting. She drove Keeper and did the raking. Anne found she could pitch hay high enough to help load the first quarter of the hay wagon, and if she drove the loaded wagon to the barns, Cord could start later, riding Red, and arrive when she did to unload the hay into the barn. Cutting was the slowest work, and Anne's help gave Cord more time for it every day.

For lunch they ate the sandwiches she packed with peaches or apricots, then lay side by side on the blanket she spread for a table for half an hour, staring at the sky, too bone weary to do more than breathe.

At night they shared the milking and feeding chores, then bathed in the creek. Anne spared an occasional rueful thought for her oh so proper upbringing as the last of her inhibitions dissolved, victim of mind-numbing fatigue.

During the day she wore a minimum of the lightest cotton clothing with a wide-brimmed straw hat and thin work gloves for protection. More often than not she cooked dinner clad only in one of Cord's shirts. He seldom bothered with clothes at all after their bath.

Anne felt no shyness over an occasional pat on the bottom, or gentle rubbing of her stomach or a breast, and no hesitation over touching Cord the same way, running her hands across flat chest muscles or tracing the curves of his back or arms. They worked together in an easygoing intimacy, but little desire flared in those weeks. It was not so much the abusive work of the day past as the knowledge that tomorrow would be the same.

It rained twice, once an afternoon thunderstorm that cost a whole day's work - the afternoon of the storm and the next morning while the fields dried - and one entire day-long rain that cost a day and a half in drying time.

They accepted the breaks gratefully, but on those days Cord checked the horse herds and fences, and Anne caught up on baking, laundry, and the garden.

They had been driving themselves this way for three weeks when he told her. "We could quit today."

"What do you mean, could?"

"By the end of today we'll have the barns full. It's enough to get our horses through a hard winter in good shape."

"And if we keep going?"

"Only about another week before even the higher meadows will be too ripe - or there'll be a serious rain. Anything else we harvest, we'd have to stack outside."

"Then what?"

"We'd sell it."

"How much?"

"Maybe the price of a horse."

"That's a lot of money for a week's work. Let's keep going."

"Mm. Sure?"

Stretched beside him on the lunchtime blanket, Anne nodded as vigorously as she could manage. So they went back to work.

Exactly one week later, as they again lay side by side, Cord signaled the end. "Another couple of hours and we're done, babe."

She turned to look at him. "You know, I've never done anything like this before, never been so tired, but I've never felt so good

about anything either, like it really matters."

He was up on one elbow now, face shadowed by the sun behind him. As always, his eyes drew all light available, and in the golden glints was a beginning flicker of desire.

"Tired?"

Anne touched the springy black hair at his temple. "Not that tired."

He drew her close and kissed her mouth, face, and eyes, leaving a trail of awakened nerve endings down her throat and across her collar bone.

Anne lay passive and accepting until he began unfastening the buttons of her waist, but then stopped his hands, got to her feet and undressed for him. The mask was gone; he leaned back and watched with undisguised appreciation until she finished and was standing naked before him.

As Anne pulled the pins from her hair and shook it down in a silken cloud around her shoulders, she caught a hint of something in his face and eyes she had never seen before, but he instantly lowered his gaze, stood, and removed what little he had on, for his shirt was hanging from the hay wagon where it had been since mid-morning. The past weeks had also honed Cord down to thinness, and muscle, bone, and tendon showed in sharp relief under warm copper skin, emphasizing, not detracting from, the ever-present aura of power around him.

As she raised a hand to touch him, he came to her, tipped her chin up for the first kiss. The taste of him always made Anne feel lightheaded and joyful. This time when she began to sag against him, clinging for support, Cord lowered her to the blanket, following her down without stopping the kiss. Once again she simply accepted his caresses in an almost trance-like state.

"Turn over."

Drugged with the kiss and the sensations it provoked now spreading through her, she obeyed, pillowing her head on crossed arms, eyes closed. He pushed her hair aside and teased the soft spot behind and below her ear with small nipping kisses, trailed across her shoulders, made her shiver with pleasure as he worked on the nape of her neck.

His fingers drew tantalizing patterns of pleasure on her sides as he kissed his way down her spine, tracing the thin line of the knife scar as if he could heal it still. Then he kneaded the cheeks of her bottom and backs of her thighs as he worked his way back to the nape of her neck.

Anne turned onto her back, wriggling with delight as he again tasted his way downward, then began to nuzzle and nudge at soft

breast flesh. As he spread a hand flat across her belly, her muscles rippled with building desire. He fastened on one already hardened nipple, then the other, sucking and nipping, sending hot sparks of pleasure racing everywhere. His hand moved rhythmically on her belly, slipped down to stroke her inner thighs, and finally explored the swelling, dampening flesh hidden by crisp dark curls. She could no longer be still but pushed up against his hand moaning softly.

Suddenly everything stopped. The point of his chin on her breastbone pinned her to the ground as she focused with bewilderment on eyes unquestionably gold in the sun.

"Maybe *I'm* too tired."

"You wretch!" A hard push on his shoulders, and Cord let her roll him right over. She kissed him as he had her, but he was not as passive, his fingers tracing patterns along her spine as she kissed him.

He stilled as she tasted her way from the hard flat nipples along each rib down to the beginning of the seam-like line of hair. Her cheek rested there, as she traced light teasing circles on the lean belly, down corded thighs, returning to stroke the velvety skin of his now rigid shaft. She heard a half-smothered groan, then his hands clasped her around the waist, and she was astonished to find herself astride him, impaled.

Gazing down she was captivated by this view of her husband. Eyes half closed, features softened and blurred with passion, emotions were for once easy to read on his face. She moved slightly and saw his pleasure.

Concentrating totally on the effect she was having, she began a slow rolling rhythm, almost intoxicated with her own power. So engrossed in his reactions was she that a spasm coursing through her own body, causing an arching break in the easy cadence, brought a gasp, half from the intensity of the sensation, half from surprise.

He roused then from quiescent acceptance, pulling her down tight against him, reversing their positions, driving into her. She heard her name, low and throaty, then a sound that seemed torn from him.

No familiar skimming waves of pleasure came; instead her body was shattered with an inward explosion that fused them. As if from a great distance she heard a woman's drawn out cry. Surely that could not be her.

The emotional cataclysm left her shaken and uncertain until her eyes locked on Cord's. The words were there for her to read, reflected in his eyes, written on his face, and she could feel them pounding through her with each heartbeat.

She touched his face and whispered, “I love you.” He did not pull away, but said nothing. When he closed his eyes and pulled her against his chest, she knew he would not speak the words, but would not deny them either. It was enough for now.

They finished work in daylight for the first time, and it was only full dark as Anne began preparing dinner. Usually Cord was beside her, helping, but tonight he sat at the table, fiddling with a bit of harness, avoiding her eyes, as he had all evening. When he spoke, his words were unexpected.

“How do you feel about my mother, about the Indian blood?”

Anne busied herself checking the food on the stove, trying to think of an answer that would be honest but not too revealing.

“Never mind. Guess I don’t really want to hear it.”

The bitterness of his tone jolted Anne out of her reverie as she realized what her delay had led him to conclude. “Oh, no, that’s not it - it’s just that the truth sounds so selfish. I don’t want….” She was trapped now. He wasn’t going to let her tell less than the whole truth.

“Tell me.”

“I’m glad of it. I know it’s always made your life harder. That’s what so selfish of me, but if it weren’t such a…,” she searched for the right words, “social handicap, you’d have been married years ago to somebody like Rachel, and you wouldn’t have been here when I needed you. Not just today - I mean, even at the beginning - I didn’t want you to be hurt so or have your life changed like that, but I can’t even wish in my heart it didn’t happen because if it hadn’t I’d be - I don’t know even - maybe living in hell, or maybe really dead. I thought about killing myself once, you know, but I didn’t want to be dead. I just didn’t want to be married to George Detrick.”

Cord totally ignored the part Anne found so excruciatingly embarrassing. “Why would I marry somebody like Rachel?”

“Men always choose women like Rachel. She’s petite and feminine and soft and round.”

“Annie, do you see me riding docile fat ponies?”

She giggled at both images his words brought to her mind. “Well, if you’d been able to choose, you would have, and you wouldn’t have been unmarried at twenty-eight.”

“If I’d gotten to choose, I might have been married to you at twenty, but you probably wouldn’t have been too receptive to the idea.”

Her heart began to thud again. “That’s nice to say, but it’s not really….”

“Yes, it is. You were the first girl I ever really lusted over, you

know. I mean not just a boy's desire to do things to a woman, any woman, but a particular desire to do certain things to a certain woman."

"You're saying that to make me feel good."

"You remember the day I knocked you off your feet - with the packages?"

She nodded.

"Before I recognized you I was waiting for the screaming and trouble, but when I saw it was you, I started to notice the shape of your legs and the way the lace on your underclothes looked so much better than the stuff on my sisters'. And how good you looked laying on your back looking up at me."

"You mean I was impressed with how polite you were, and *that's* what you were thinking?"

"You should be more impressed with how polite I was now you know what I was thinking." There was a wicked grin in his eyes now. "But I never had the same effect on you, did I?"

"No, but nobody did. I never knew women had feelings like that until the first time you kissed me."

"Come on, you were going to marry that Richard person."

"If I'd married Richard, we could have been married fifty years, and I'd still never have known women had feelings like that. He did kiss me, you know. So did a few others. It was just - lips. I was so insulted because you were surprised I hadn't - been with him that way. I couldn't understand, but I did later. Four years - if I'd been engaged to you my virtue might have lasted four days, but never four weeks." She grinned at him. "One kiss, and I'd have been lost."

"Wouldn't have helped much that I'd have spent every waking hour plotting ways to besmirch you."

"But in the beginning, when we were first married, you didn't even - I mean - but you didn't."

"I thought you wouldn't like it. I thought you wouldn't like it a lot."

"Oh. I thought I wasn't supposed to like it. I thought there was something the matter with me because I didn't *dislike* it the way I was supposed to." She laughed out loud. "I'm sure glad we both got older and wiser."

She actually saw one corner of his mouth curl upwards. "Mm. Me too."

Later that night his voice pulled her back from the edge of sleep. "I've been thinking."

"Umm."

"Tomorrow I've got to fix the thatch on those hay stacks against the rain and catch up on some other things, and I guess you do too.

How about after that we take a some time to ourselves and do whatever we feel like? Seems we worked hard enough we're entitled."

It was a grand idea, and she told him so.

* * *

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Chapter 33

ANNE THOUGHT OF EACH ONE of their ten days off as a separate gold and blue treasure. Sometimes a slight breeze stirred the trees and grass, but it never became a full force wind. The temperature was neither too hot nor too cold, and only an occasional fat, fluffy, white cloud scudded across clear skies of the deepest blue.

Cord showed her all of the Bennett Ranch. They looked over the big house from a distance, but avoided other people. They played games on horseback, swam and bathed in the creek, lazed over picnic lunches, and made love in one secluded spot after another. They came together with smoldering intensity and with teasing laughter, each time different, each time glorious.

She loved him openly and without reservation. She knew he would never be so open, but little by little the impassive mask slipped for longer and longer. Laughter might still only be in his eyes, but traces of expression began to animate his face.

The terrifying, bloody day of their marriage was less than a year ago. If they had come so far in this time, Anne believed she would in the end hear the words she, like all women, longed to hear, but if he never spoke of it, she would be content with this. He loved her, and she knew it, and he was capable of such tenderness it left her trembling, overwhelmed by her own love for him.

When the morning of the eleventh day dawned unseasonably cold with intermittent drizzle, they reluctantly returned to the demands of everyday life.

Between the showers, Anne cleaned all the overripe, rotting and tough fruit and vegetables from the garden. The pigs would feast for days. She began harvesting the last of the ripe produce for preserving, and tucked vegetables like squash away in the root cellar. Even with the weeks of neglect, there should be more than enough of the garden's bounty to provide for a varied diet through the winter.

Cord spent the day bringing in the two-year-olds to start working and checking fence, but when the weather persisted dreary and cold on the next day, started helping with mounds of fruit and vegetables in the kitchen.

Shortly before noon Foxface sounded a warning and Frank, Luke, and Pete rode into the yard. Soon the pegs by the door were covered with slickers and big blond men seemed to fill the kitchen.

Anne knew that Cord hadn't said more than hello and goodbye to his brother since the morning after the race, and he barely looked up for a greeting now. She wasn't any happier to see Frank, but she

was growing fond of Luke and Pete. So she gave all three of them a warm welcome.

She couldn't get any of them to sit down until they brought the rocking chair into the kitchen and she perched on it for a few seconds, but then she hopped up and went back to what she had been doing, although she chatted with the visitors over her shoulder.

Frank explained the visit.

"Your mother knew you wouldn't be in town during haying, but it's been almost six weeks now. She's worried, and I promised her I'd stop by and check on you. The boys are going to town tomorrow for supplies, so they'll let her know you're all right."

"Pete and I stopped by a couple of times, but nobody was here." Luke obviously didn't want anyone thinking things had gotten to the official inquiry stage without an effort on his part.

Anne turned slightly and smiled at them, hands busy. "The haying took almost four weeks is all, and then we took some time to ourselves. We'll be in next Sunday - if it isn't still so miserable out."

"We'll make sure your mother gets word," promised Pete.

Cord saw no reason to be sociable with his brother, and the way Frank and the boys were staring at his hands as he cut the vegetables wasn't softening his attitude. The kitchen table was piled high with green beans, and he was cutting them to the length Anne wanted. He ignored his nephews and his brother and kept the knife flashing. As fast as Anne filled a group of preserving jars, he had another pile of beans ready for her to scoop up and start again. The uncut pile diminished steadily.

Without raising his head, Cord watched Frank watching. He wondered what Frank would come up with to explain the sight of a knife in his hands and no dead men in evidence.

Tearing his gaze from the table, Frank addressed Anne again. "Sure smells good in here. That can't be beans."

"No, before any peaches went into jars, I filled a pie with them." Anne pointed to the jars of peaches on the floor. "If you'd like to stay for lunch, it's almost done and should be cool enough for dessert."

Luke and Pete accepted with enthusiasm, leaving Frank tight-lipped with displeasure. He turned to Cord. "How come you stacked hay outside this year?"

Cord wasn't any more pleased about the accepted lunch invitation than Frank was. "Barns are full."

"Full of what?"

"Hay."

"How the hell did you manage that by yourself?"

“Didn’t. Anne helped.”

It was common enough for wives of small farmers and ranchers to help with anything they could. It just was not common for Bennett women. Cord waited for Frank to make a critical remark. With any luck Anne would lose her temper and run the lot of them out of the house. But Frank paused and gave Anne a considering look.

As Cord finished with the last of the beans, Luke and Pete began regaling Anne with stories of their exploits on the range and in town and asking her opinion of one girl after another they fancied or thought they might. Frank was studying Anne covertly over the rim of his coffee cup. The dismal gray day made the light poor in the kitchen, but Anne glowed with her own inner light. Frank Bennett knew better than most men what made a woman look like that, but there was only a puzzled frown on his face.

Still, Frank looked back at Cord and made an effort. “You must be low on supplies. You want the boys to pick you up anything in town? There’ll be room in the wagon.”

Cord’s irritation with his brother was fading to amusement almost against his will. He said, “Annie?”

“That would be nice. I used almost the last of the flour in the pie crust.”

Over lunch Cord joined the conversation to some extent. When everyone was replete after sandwiches and pie, he wordlessly fished a cigar out of Frank’s breast pocket. Frank finally relaxed then too. “Why the hell don’t you buy your own?”

“Filthy habit, hate to start.” Cord lit the little black cigar and leaned back. It was a comforting routine that went back over a decade. It wasn’t a peace treaty, but it was a truce, and it was a start.

* * *

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Chapter 34

BY EARLY OCTOBER ANNE HAD been keeping a secret from Cord for almost a month. She just wanted to be absolutely sure she told herself. After all it wasn't supposed to happen. In a tiny corner of her mind, however, she knew she was afraid of his reaction. She kept remembering what he had said about feeling trapped when Rosa had conceived his child when he was in Texas. Finally, curled on his shoulder one night after particularly sweet lovemaking, she summoned her courage and said the words.

"Cord?"

"Mm."

"We're going to have a baby."

His shoulder turned from a warm pillow to a hard rock in the space of those words. Her heart leapt to her mouth.

"You heard what Craig said, Annie. It can't be. You're imagining something."

"I have every sign I've ever heard women talk about."

"Like what?"

"I haven't bled for three months."

"We'd better go see Craig. Maybe there's something wrong."

"And I felt sick every morning for almost two months. I never really got sick because we get up and do chores first and then eat, and it would pass before breakfast, but it was there, and my breasts feel the way they do before my time of the month all the time, and I started crying for no reason when I was cleaning out the garden, and laughing hysterically for no reason when I was baking the other day. That happens too, you know, strange emotions."

He pulled away. "Shit."

Obscenity had been rare from him for some time now, and it felt like a blow. Fighting tears, she admitted to herself, all right, I knew he wouldn't like it.

"So it wasn't that you weren't in love with Rosa or didn't want to stay in Texas. You felt trapped when she was with child because you didn't want to be stuck in a marriage, and you feel just as trapped now."

"Me trapped? Are you crazy? You're the one this traps. I never meant to do this to you. I wouldn't have asked you to stay last year except I thought it couldn't happen."

Anne sat up, groped around for matches and lit the lamp so she could see him.

"We are *married*, not trapped. Are you listening to me? I'm not going anywhere, pregnant, not pregnant, with a child or without a

child. *I am not going anywhere!* And you could at least pretend to be happy about it.

"Happy? Are you crazy? Do you have any idea what the hell you're talking about?"

Anne stopped fighting tears. She had never imagined anything this bad. Curling in a ball with her back to him, she gave in and wept.

Instantly she was in his arms. "Don't cry. For God's sake, don't cry. It feels like a knife in my gut. Damn it, Annie, stop."

Anne made no effort to stop crying. "I guess I am crazy," she said, hiccupping, "because I was happy about it. I *am* happy about it, and if you're not that's just too bad."

She tried to pull away, but he didn't let go. "Stop crying, and we'll talk about it." He turned her towards him and held her against his chest, stroking her hair, as her sobs dwindled.

"I didn't tell you weeks ago because I knew you wouldn't like it," she admitted.

"Have you really thought about this yourself? You're not talking about some pretty pink and white baby the world's going to hug and admire, you know."

The last traces of sobs vanished as her temper flared. "Do you think I expect our child to look like Frank and Judith's? Do you think I'm an idiot?"

"What exactly do you think it's going to look like?"

"Well, I don't know, of course. Somewhere between the two of us. If I had my choice I'd like a boy to look like you, only with one feature that was obviously from me, so I could see us both, and I'd like a girl to look just like Marie. She was the most beautiful little girl and young woman I ever saw."

Cord swallowed to control the lump in his throat several times before risking speech. If he lived to be a hundred and tried every day of the time he'd never deserve to have this woman, not for an hour, day, or week, much less this whole past year. And having loved her was going to cause her untold pain.

"There are people in town who tolerate us because they know how it happened and feel some sympathy for you, but this is going to make them downright ugly," he said. "You must know what your family is going to be like, and mine…."

"Why shouldn't your family be happy for us? They raised you and Marie and loved you dearly."

"Take my word for it. They're not going to like it, and they know it wasn't supposed to happen, which just makes it worse."

"What do you mean, they know it wasn't supposed to happen?"

"Just that. The whole town knows. Letitia Craig went and shot

off her mouth at some ladies' meeting in town."

Anne gasped. "B-but that's not right. P-people shouldn't know that about us, that's not… oh, damn!" she wailed. "How do you know?"

"I come up on people when they don't know it and they're talking is all."

"So your family knows, your *brothers* know, and my family knows…."

"Yeah, they do. Anybody not deaf who lives around here knows. Look, babe, go to sleep. Let's leave it for now. We'll go see Craig tomorrow and worry about it then, yes?"

"Tell me just one thing," Anne whispered. "If we were the only two people in the whole world, then would you be happy about it?"

"We're not. There's no use even thinking about it - we're not the only two people in the world."

She fell asleep against him quickly after that, but Cord lay awake staring into the dark. It wouldn't be true. There was something wrong was all. Oh, God, he didn't want anything wrong with her either. Something small, maybe, something Craig could give her a tonic or a pill for. He shouldn't have let her work in the hay fields like that. Deep inside he already knew it was true.

Through a sleepless night he wrestled with it. If it got bad enough he could take her south to live among more tolerant people. Down along the border - realization came in a rush. Among the mixed blood people to the south, he was accepted, as the child would be. Anne was the one who would be the outsider there. He could take her into the far territories where there were few people, but in those places life was constant danger. He could think of no solution to save her the heartache, no way to spare her the pain.

The next day Cord sat perfectly still in one of the hard, straight-backed chairs in the small room outside Craig's examining room. The doctor had been in when they arrived and no one else was about. Cord had been waiting for some time now, and the cold stone in his stomach was getting larger and colder by the minute.

When the outside door opened, he moved only his eyes. Rachel Miles Ross stood in the doorway, frozen with surprise and no little fear. Cord knew Rachel and Anne had been best friends since they were little girls and that Rachel and her family had provided Anne considerable comfort through hard times. He also knew Randal Ross was a selfish bastard who had forbidden his wife to so much as nod to Anne on the street. Although Rachel was alone, without even one of her growing young brood to tell tales, he wondered if she had the courage to ignore Randal's orders.

She did. She walked into the room and sat in a chair as far from

Cord as she could get, then cleared her throat nervously. “Is there anything wrong? Is Anne all right?”

“Fine.” Totally inexperienced with the kind of delicacy the situation called for, Cord couldn’t have explained the purpose of their visit to Rachel if he wanted to. And he didn’t want to.

They sat in silence until Craig stuck his head through the door to the treatment room. “Why, hello, Rachel, we’ll be through here and I can see you in just a minute. I’ve got that cough medicine for Jimmy all ready for you. Cord, why don’t you come on in. Anne thinks it would be easier if you heard this too instead of her trying to repeat it.”

Anne was sitting in another uncomfortable looking chair, pink faced. Just what exactly did a doctor examine to decide if a woman was pregnant, Cord suddenly wondered.

Craig was beaming at him, looking very pleased. “Anne’s exactly right. About three and a half months we estimate.” He chuckled with what looked like genuine pleasure. “I’m surprised you’re willing to come see me about it though. Last year I was sure you were going to die, and this year I’d still have bet against your becoming a father. I seem to make a habit of underestimating you.”

Cord said nothing, wondered if Craig knew about the sneering remarks about steers and geldings that had been made in his hearing in places like the feed store until one day Ed Bentley had crossed the line and mentioned Anne’s name. Cord had left Bentley on his back in a lot of pain with a wet stain spreading across the front of his trousers and left every townsman present that day with no doubt that mentioning Anne’s name was crossing a line better not crossed. Even so, putting up with that because Craig and his wife had big mouths didn’t make Cord feel like responding in kind to Craig’s light treatment of the subject.

Craig ignored Cord’s attitude and launched into detailed instructions on what he considered proper prenatal care. Pregnant women shouldn’t coddle themselves he said. He emphasized proper diet, plenty of non-stressful exercise and outlined a few dos and don’ts. When he began delicately indicating continued marital relations were possible with certain qualifications, Anne’s color, which had faded, rose again, and Cord was suddenly sure he was blushing himself. He clenched his jaw. Surely his skin was too dark for it to show.

When the doctor finally wound down and asked if they had any questions, Cord asked flatly, “Anne going to get to tell people this herself, or will it be all over town before we leave here?”

Craig’s smile and joking manner disappeared. “All I can tell you is that if it’s all over town from here, you can comfort yourself at my

hanging. I'll have murdered my wife, you see." After a pause, he added, "I really am sorry. So is my wife. Nothing like that will ever happen again. You have my word." He extended his hand. "And congratulations, I'm glad I was wrong."

Cord relented and took the outstretched hand. "Doesn't make much difference now, does it?"

"No, it doesn't." The doctor escorted them to the door, and said with no little understanding, "Rachel, why don't you just come in when you're ready."

Seeing the two women standing looking at each other so tentatively, Cord muttered, "I'll wait outside," and disappeared.

Anne had often wished she could spend just a few minutes with Rachel again. Now here she was, and no words were necessary. She met Rachel in the middle of the room, and they fell into each other's arms, hugging hard.

"Oh, Anne, I can't tell you how much I've worried about you, how often I've prayed for you. Daddy says you're all right, but that man is so frightening. Tell me truly, are you really all right?"

"Really all right," Anne said. "In fact I never knew life could be so good. That frightening man is the best thing that ever happened to me."

Rachel straightened and searched Anne's face. "Daddy says - is it true? Are you in love with him?"

"Any right-minded woman would love him after about five minutes. He is so good. Sometimes I wake up in the night, afraid, and I realize what I'm afraid of is what could have happened and didn't. Whoever would think I'd get so lucky?"

"Lucky? Oh, Anne." Rachel shook her head, almost laughing. "You do look good. Daddy might even be right. He says you glow."

Before Anne could answer, she heard the sound of the door opening. Turning away from her friend before they could be seen together, she forced a neutral expression on her face and walked out as soon as the young mother entering had her three children all inside. If only she could have had a little more time with Rachel. If only.

* * *

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Chapter 35

THE SUNDAY AFTER THE VISIT to Craig dawned gray and with the threat of rain. Cord would have refused to make a trip to town except that Anne really wanted to go. She wanted tell her mother about the baby. She wanted to tell everyone and wouldn't listen to anything he had to say on the subject.

"You're not happy about it, so you don't think anyone else will be," she said, and after that refused to discuss it.

Even so, he thought he had convinced her to talk to her mother first and then Martha. Maybe the two older women could control the families' initial reactions, or at least keep Anne from hearing the worst of it.

However, when Leona Wells showed up in Martha's kitchen an hour earlier than usual with Rob right behind her looking as sullen as ever, Cord watched his worst fears play out.

Martha was gracious, and Leona apologetic. "I'm so sorry to be imposing like this. Please forgive me, but I couldn't catch Anne at the church and I need to talk to her."

Leona turned to Anne, "It's such a relief to see you. Rachel came to see me yesterday and told me she saw you at the doctor's. I've been frantic that one of those horses hurt you or you were seriously ill. A two-hour trip just to see the doctor…. Rachel asked Dr. Craig why you were there, and he not only wouldn't tell her, she said she's never known him to be so rude. She was almost in tears telling me about it."

"I'm fine, Mother," Anne said. "You can see for yourself. I'm not hurt and I'm fine. After dinner we can have a talk."

By now Martha had extra places set at the table and Leona and Rob sitting on either side of Anne. "You two go on into the parlor and talk now," she said. "Judith and I don't need help here. I'm glad it's not serious, but I know myself how mothers worry."

Anne hesitated for a moment, gave Cord a defiant look, and smiled at Martha and at her mother. "I'm going to find out about that myself soon. We're going to have a baby."

Leona gasped and lost color. Martha froze with a plate in her hand. As the awkward silence stretched out, Anne's smile slowly faded.

Then Rob jumped to his feet, white-faced and hoarse with fury. "So just living out there with that devil telling everybody you're better off now than you were when you lived a decent life with decent people wasn't revenge enough for you? You had to stay there and let him fill you with his filthy, savage seed until it took. Have

you ever considered for a minute the one you're punishing the most is yourself? How are you going to feel with some dark mongrel sucking at your breast, sister dearest? Just how are you going to feel then?"

Cord was slowed by the effort to control a killing rage. His hand actually closed around the knife in his boot before he jerked it away, and he was only halfway to his feet, still unsure what he was going to do, when Anne hit her brother. The slap had all the strength earned with months of hard work behind it. The crack resounded through the kitchen, and Rob staggered back, knocking over his chair, the bright red imprint of her hand outlined on his livid face.

Anne leaned toward him, shaking, low-voiced with fury. "You think about this, brother, dear, that filthy savage at my breast makes me scream with joy. I'm sure I'll like his child there just fine."

She turned then and fled into the cold rain, not even closing the door behind her. Cord moved towards the door wooden with the effort at control, picked up their coats and rain slickers and went after her.

She was at the back of the barn, facing the wall, and for the first time when he touched her, she shrugged him off. "Go away."

"Anne, Annie."

He heard the break in his own voice, knew she heard it too when she turned and threw herself at him. Her fingers were digging into his back, and he held her just as hard, buried his face in her hair. She was shaking but not crying.

"Damn them. Damn you."

"Ssh. Ssh." The lump in his throat was so painful he couldn't have said anything even if he knew what to say.

When Martha's voice echoed through the barn, Cord pulled away from Anne, then cursed himself for doing it. Anne was facing the wall again as Martha came into sight.

"Your mother and brother are gone, Anne, and I told your brother he's no longer welcome in my house. Now suppose you come back in. You're soaked to the skin and shouldn't be going home wet and cold and hungry."

Anne's voice was barely a whisper. "I can't, Martha. I'm too ashamed. People don't talk like that."

Martha went to her and put an arm around her shaking shoulders. "I've been provoked into saying some pretty extraordinary things myself over the years. And no one has ever come close to being as offensive as your brother. It will be much easier to come in now than next week, you know."

Anne hunched over further toward the wall, shaking her head.

Cord finally managed words. “Annie, please.”

Anne stopped resisting then and let Martha wrap a slicker around her shoulders and lead her back to the house.

The extra places set for Rob and Leona had disappeared as if they never were. Martha guided Anne back to her chair and began to bustle about. The people in the room were so quiet every sound of cutlery, dishes, or a cleared throat was magnified.

Cord watched only Anne, who stared at her hands in her lap and huddled miserably in her chair.

It was Luke, usually insensitive and irreverent, who broke the spell. He got up, walked around behind her and with hands on both her shoulders leaned over and kissed her on the cheek. “Your brother’s a fool, Anne. He deserved everything he got. Congratulations about the baby.”

Pete was right behind him, also bestowing a peck on the cheek. “Yes, congratulations. If you’d like us to go knock his head in for you, just say.”

Her voice sounded like a little girl’s. “Thank you, Luke. Thank you, Pete. No, it’s all right.”

Cord saw a tear land with a splash on the back of one hand and wanted to carry her out of there, hold her and never let go, but she was soaked - cold, distraught, and wet - taking her home like that was asking for trouble. Anne glanced up, and what no amount of kindness from Martha, Luke, or Pete could accomplish the anguish in his eyes did.

She lifted her chin, straightened her spine, and forced a watery smile. “I’m fine, really.”

It wasn’t fine, but they got through the meal somehow.

When dinner was over, Martha placed a chair near the stove for Anne and fussed over her there. She also made it clear she wanted the men out of her kitchen. Unsure what else to do, Cord followed his brothers to the parlor, walked over to a window and stared out at the bleak, wet day. Coming to town today had been a mistake in every way; it would be a miserable trip home in the rain. He felt a hand on his shoulder. Ephraim, he supposed. Another hand offered a small black cigar. Frank, not Ephraim. They stood there, smoking silently, side by side, watching the rain jump in the puddles in the yard, drip off the eaves, splash on the glass.

Finally, Frank spoke, “How do you feel about it?”

“Not good. She’s been hurt enough.”

“I didn’t mean that really. How do you feel about a baby?”

Cord shrugged. “Doesn’t seem real. Just words. I’ve never had much to do with one.”

It wasn’t an accusation but a simple statement of a fact Frank

knew. Judith's obsessive fear had kept Cord from ever getting near any of her children when they were small, and her hysterical behavior after Beth's birth was what had driven him out of the main ranch for good.

"You know I'd have changed that if I could."

Cord made no answer. Nevertheless, Frank stayed there behind him, his silent presence a comfort of sorts.

Still, he was glad to hear Anne's voice, "I'm dry now. Can we go home please."

He helped her into her coat and slicker and they left without another word.

ONCE CORD AND ANNE WERE gone, Martha stopped bustling around and lowered herself heavily into a chair. When Judith poured her a cup of coffee and joined her, Martha started to lift her cup and put it down again. Her hands were shaking.

Judith noticed. "It's been an awful day. Are you going to be all right?" she asked.

"Yes, I just need a little more time." Knowing how Judith felt about Cord, Martha almost didn't go on, but then decided Judith should know. "When I went out to get them, they didn't hear me coming, and I saw…. I went back out and then called them so they'd know I was there because I saw…."

Martha took a swallow of coffee and started again. "It's been almost thirty years since our baby died. Jimmy. James." She smiled at the sound of her first son's name, remembering. "The pain is still there but most of the time now it's - softened by time, and I can remember the good things too now. But when it happened - the pain was so terrible I'd hold on to Ephraim so hard - because somehow the two of us could bear what neither one of us could alone."

Martha pulled out her handkerchief, mopped her eyes, and blew her nose. "That's what I saw today in the barn - two people trying to bear a grief too great for one alone. It brought it all back. We saw her hurt and recognized it, but because he doesn't show anything we think he doesn't feel it either. What Rob said was really directed at him. The Wells family doesn't think it's a tragedy that she's married and expecting a baby. They think it's a tragedy that she's married to *him* and expecting *his* baby. I've agreed with Ephraim about them, but now I don't know. No one can hurt that much unless they care."

"What does Ephraim think?"

"About the same as Frank - that she's strong willed and temperamental and is in love with him or thinks she is because he's so indifferent he lets her have her own way. That he feels he owes

her and finds a wife a - convenience - and doesn't really care much so long as it's not too much trouble."

Judith nodded her head. "That's about what Frank says all right, but Martha…." Judith told Martha about what she had seen the morning after the race.

"Have you told Frank?"

"No. He'd say I may have seen something like that but I was reading things into it that weren't there. The strange thing is, after all these years - nothing ever helped the way I felt about him. It was just terror, and now I can't even see why I felt like that. It's hard to be afraid of a man who's capable of that much tenderness. Are you going to say anything about what you saw?"

Martha was thoughtful. "No, I'm not. You're right. Neither of them will believe us - at least our interpretation. If we're right, they'll come to it in time themselves. In the meantime, so far as I'm concerned a baby is good news, and anyone who doesn't think so had better keep quiet around me."

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Chapter 36

ROB WELLS KNEW WHAT HE had said to his sister was indefensibly, unforgivably wrong. His ugly attack on Anne disgusted even Rob himself. The joy that shone so brightly from her face and which seemed more obvious every time he saw her had not escaped him. It was also becoming more and more difficult for him to pretend to himself that he did not feel a grudging admiration for the quiet man who so affected her.

Unlike the Bennetts, Rob knew his sister would not talk herself into loving a man without reason. Somehow, in spite of the indifferent face he showed the world, Cord Bennett was meeting some deep, basic need in Anne, and Rob knew it.

Although Anne's slap had been no light blow, Rob felt as if he had given, not received, a beating. The memory of the light fading from her eyes, even as the smile faded from her lips, made Rob feel truly ugly.

The worst of it was that he had not meant his own words. They were his father's words, simply plucked from memory and parroted in the heat of the moment - because Anne's news had roused something approaching panic in Rob. He had a very good idea of how his father would react to the news that Anne was, after all, carrying the hated half-breed's child. Rob also was privy to, and more and more afraid of, his father's latest plan to rip Anne from the misalliance he had caused and now found so unacceptable.

At last Rob had begun to think for himself, at last he disagreed with his father over more than a minor matter, and at last he had come to the conclusion that his father was totally, tragically wrong. But Rob still could not oppose Edward more than mildly and still did not completely believe Cord's and Anne's version of the events at the Bennett Ranch the previous year.

In the end, he decided that if his father went ahead with his latest plan to get Anne away from her husband so that she would "come to her senses," at worst it would cause everyone some temporary unhappiness and inconvenience, but it would all come right in the end.

Rob Wells lacked the maturity to judge his father accurately and the courage to oppose his father openly, but he was cursed with an insight that sent dread coursing through him when his father greeted the news of Anne's pregnancy not with the expected rage but with a self-satisfied smile. "Well, well, now sooner or later that damn Injun will come into town without her."

THE LATE NOVEMBER MORNING WAS heavily overcast with a sharp, cutting wind out of the north and the smell of snow in the air when Frank Bennett pulled into the yard with the team and wagon. Anne and Cord had not been to church or to the Bennetts on Sundays since the terrible scene weeks ago. Anne greeted Frank warily.

"Where's Cord?" Frank's engaging grin meant he was at least going to start the visit on his best behavior.

Anne just gestured. Foxface had sounded a loud alarm, and Cord was already on his way across the yard towards the house.

Warming himself in the kitchen over coffee, Frank explained his purpose.

"Everybody else seems to have something important to do," he said, "so I'm the one elected to go for supplies today in this damned cold wind. Thought I'd see if I could talk you into suffering along with me." He looked at Cord questioningly.

At this time of year no one with any commonsense traveled without equipment that would allow them to survive sudden severe weather. Traveling with company was better than traveling alone for the same reason. Even so, Anne now knew enough about the operation of the Bennett Ranch to be absolutely sure that there was no way Frank Bennett would ever be going for supplies in any weather unless he wanted to. What Frank wanted was to start patching things up with his brother, and Anne wasn't sure how she felt about that.

Cord regarded Frank thoughtfully. "Riley?"

"Riley got banged up a couple of days ago. Nothing bad, but his old bones would ache worse than usual over a wagon ride to town and back."

Cord raised his eyebrows slightly at Anne. Still unsure of her own feelings and knowing full well Cord preferred a difficult relationship with his family to none, she replied with a tiny shrug of one shoulder to let him know the decision was his.

"All right. I'm not working horses in this wind anyway."

When Frank started for the wagon, Cord held back a minute, gave her a quick kiss. She went back to her work, humming.

The train was now speeding across darkening flat prairie. The whistle sounded, forcing Anne away from the comfort of the past back into the terror of the present. Her father had not yet finished his self-congratulatory speech.

"He wouldn't let Handler and his men pull you off the street under his nose because it would have offended his pride. I probably should have had them just try to buy you. Redskins sell their women for a bottle of

whiskey."

So Frank had sized up the situation perfectly those many months ago. The fight was a setup. Among the terrible mistakes she had made was underestimating the depth of her father's hate, the strength of his obsession. And because of her mistakes - her misjudgment - the future was no longer to be filled with laughter and love. Instead there would be only long, hollow years echoing with grief and regret. Of Cord's love she had no doubt, but the lying note went right to the heart of his inability to trust. For the rest of his life he would accept that she was so faithless, so shallow, she had been able to just walk away.

"Some of my friends thought I was crazy to wait so long, but a good military mind knows the value of patience. There's nothing any of them can do now, even the lawyer brother. If we'd had to hide you in town until we could get the train, but no, it was Friday, Friday. Two trains out of town a week, and it happened the day of the afternoon train. The storm was looking more and more like a blizzard by the time we left. We were lucky to get away when we did. No one can follow us until Tuesday, and there may not even be a train on Tuesday. That Ephraim, he's no fool; he won't pursue it. Of course, that ignorant savage couldn't find the City of Chicago with a map if he wanted to. I hope the other brother read the note to him. Then he didn't even bother Robert." He gave an ugly laugh.

Anne said nothing, ate nothing, drank little. Chicago came too soon.

* * *

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Chapter 37

CORD EXPECTED THE TRIP TO town to be awkward, hoped it wouldn't turn downright unpleasant. To his surprise, once they were underway, Frank began telling him the news in the latest letter from their sister, Hannah. After the death of her alcoholic husband, Hannah's life had begun to improve dramatically. The changes in Hannah's life were an easy subject. Cord was as pleased with the news as Frank.

After that, Frank asked about Cord's plans to cross Fortune on Red's daughters and perhaps vice versa, upgrading his whole herd in a relatively short time. Frank had similar ideas about improving the Bennett cattle. Conversation wasn't difficult after that, and the silences were comfortable. By the time they were almost home, Cord wondered if there was actually some small chance that things might someday come right between them after all.

Frank seemed to be thinking along the same lines. "You know, it occurs to me that if I got to know you, I might like you," he said. The words were light. The sentiment was not.

"Heaven forbid," Cord said dryly.

Frank laughed.

Good feelings evaporated the minute the house came into sight. In the bitter cold, no smoke was rising from the chimney. Cord was out of the wagon before Frank got it stopped. Anne wasn't in the kitchen. By the time he had checked both bedrooms and behind the house, Frank was inside, standing at the kitchen table holding a piece of pale blue paper.

"It was on the table, under that cup," he said, holding it out.

As Cord read the short note penned in blue ink, he felt a pain so intense, his vision blurred for a second. He crushed the paper, let it drop to the floor.

"Cord?"

He looked at his brother, feeling a yawning emptiness that made it difficult even to think what needed to be said. "Send Riley over here in the morning, will you, Frank? I'll leave you a signed authorization. Have him take care of the stock till you can sell everything." He headed for the bedroom.

Desperation laced Frank's words. "Damn it, Cord, don't do this again. You can't have ever thought she'd stay anyway. You can't be stiff-necked enough to throw your life away just because she's walked out. What about the baby? We'll raise it, but it's still yours. Don't you even care about that?"

Cord spun around at the bedroom door. "Leave it alone, Frank.

Just go. This time I'll send word."

Frank met his eyes for long moments, the desire to argue written all over him, but in the end he turned and left, cursing under his breath with every step.

Cord began packing for winter travel on horseback. It was only mid-afternoon now. He would feed the stock early and leave before dark. South again, he thought vaguely. He'd once thought he might like to see the country to the north, but not this time of year.

Chores done for the last time, he reentered the house. Keeper would need time to eat and then he'd saddle up and go. He sat numbly in the cold. Except for that one stab of intense pain, he felt only an empty disbelief, and as he waited for the time to pass, it came to him that that was just what he felt - disbelief.

When exactly had he stopped believing that she would leave? Was it the night she had turned everything upside down and accused him of feeling trapped by the coming child? An image flashed through his mind of silver eyes and soft parted lips, of her face laughing up at him from a blanket spread in the hay meadow. All right, damn it, he cursed himself, you wanted to believe she'd stay and you convinced yourself of it, and now you can't accept you were right in the first place. She's gone. Gone like a thief in the night, stealing bits and pieces of your heart and soul. Gone without the courage to face you, gone leaving a damn note….

And that, of course, was the hardest part to swallow. Even when he'd believed she would go, he had pictured her looking him right in the eye - I'm tired of you, tired of living here, I'm leaving, going back to a better life, my own kind of people. She was not a coward, not afraid of him, would not just creep away.

He picked the crumpled note up off the floor, smoothed it out, and read it again. "Cord - We both always knew it was a mistake, and I am finally admitting it. I am going back to my family. My father will talk to Ephraim about the baby. Anne." Three sentences. Three sentences that could destroy a man. If he believed them.

He had only seen her handwriting on supply lists and recipes, but surely it was hers. The cookbook was open on the shelf, and he went over to compare the writing against a handwritten recipe tucked inside. It looked identical. In his mind he heard her laughing, referring to the cookbook as her most precious possession.

Numbness dissolved as Cord looked around the house with growing awareness. Nothing was gone, not even a coat. He studied the note again. Was there blue paper like this and blue ink in with her things? The only paper he knew of in the house was the white tablet he kept for bills of sale. The ink was black. She sometimes used that paper and a pencil for lists. The blue note had been folded

he realized - as if to fit in an envelope. He refolded the note along the same lines and pocketed it.

Earlier he had distributed all the cash in the house, except the five hundred dollars he considered Anne's, in several different pockets. Now he went back to the hiding place under a floor board and took the rest. Then he picked up the saddlebags, canteens, and bedroll he had packed earlier and headed for the barn without looking back.

By the time Cord reached Mason, snow was beginning to fall in small, icy flakes. He tethered Keeper in the lee of the barn behind the Wells house and threw his slicker over the horse to keep as much of the saddle and the horse as dry as possible. Then he began a careful reconnoiter of the house.

From the outside, the two-story frame house looked similar to Ephraim's, but he knew from Anne the interior was quite different. Where Ephraim's house had a huge kitchen, here it was a small room where no one spent time except to prepare the meals that were always served in the formal dining room. The house was dark except for a single light in a room toward the back. The back door was locked. The front was not. Bedrooms first, he thought, slipping noiselessly towards the stairs.

ROB WELLS WAS UNABLE TO make himself even sit down anywhere in the house except the kitchen. Maybe because it was the only place he couldn't remember ever having had a discussion with his father. So he sat there, drinking coffee and staring at the bottle of whiskey he had set in the middle of the table with longing.

Rob's hero worship and unquestioning belief in his father had died a hard death that afternoon, but he was going to follow Edward's instructions to the letter tonight one last time. His contingency instructions, he thought, with a bitterly. His father really believed Cord was going to accept that note and shrug. All Edward was worried about was what Ephraim and Frank might do because of the baby.

Rob knew absolutely his father was wrong. He knew he was going to have to face Cord tonight as surely as he knew the sun would rise in the morning. What Rob wanted most in the world was to begin draining the whiskey bottle. He wanted to drink until guilt and memory were obliterated, until the images raging in his mind disappeared, but before giving in, he was going to pass on his father's lie.

And so he sat waiting, haunted by memories of his sister. He saw her as a girl, then a woman, saw her laughing and happy, sad and crying, but saw her always with her chin up, spine straight,

taking whatever disappointments or constraints life offered with courage and pride. Then sickness flowed through him as he could not stop the pictures from this afternoon rising in his mind.

Through it all, interspersed with the images of Anne, was the picture of a lean, fierce man on a flame-colored horse, heading with increasing speed straight at the impossibly high undercut bank. Over and over, Rob saw again the man flattening out against the horse's neck and back, the stallion's muscles bunching and straining, felt again the awe he had felt that day as the horse landed atop the bank and went on. Cord would come, and Rob would tell him what his father had instructed him to say. And then Rob was going to tell him the truth.

Cord came out of the darkness of the house the way the torturing pictures came out of Rob's memory, first just a presence felt, then one shadow darker than the others taking form, coming to life. He materialized like a ghost, eerily, without sound. The hat kept all but the flat planes of his lower jaw hidden. Light reflected from the lamp off the snow melting on the dark wool coat. A rifle dangled loosely from his right hand.

As Rob gaped, unable to decide if this was the real man or another figure from his mind, Cord moved slightly and the flame from the lamp glittered from his eyes with a feral light. Cold fingers clawed Rob's spine. This was the sight that had destroyed Jack Hatch's bravado and sent him to the gallows gibbering. Indeed this apparition might be sending Rob himself to hell before tonight was over, and knowing that, Rob still welcomed the vision. If there was a way to fix what he had helped his father do this afternoon, this man could do it.

Cord walked into the light, changing from devil to man. "Where is she?"

Rob knew then that Cord had already searched the house, and he answered with the words he had promised to speak. "She's on her way to Chicago with my parents. She doesn't want to see you again. My father will talk to Ephraim about the baby when he gets back."

The words had no effect on Cord. "Your Aunt Clara?"

"Yes."

"Give me the address."

Rob took a pale blue envelope with Clara Wainwright's return address on it out from under the whiskey bottle and handed it over. He watched Cord fit the matching piece of stationery into the envelope then push both deep into a coat pocket.

"So your aunt wrote the note," he said.

"Yes."

Cord helped himself to a cup of coffee and sat down opposite Rob at the table. “You’d better tell it.”

Relief sluiced through Rob, yet the fear and guilt were not diminished. His mouth moved, but no words came. The amber eyes narrowed. “She’s all right isn’t she?”

Rob stuttered, “N-no, yes, well, mostly.” Did he really see raging contempt in those terrible eyes, or was it his own opinion of himself reflected back from an icy void?

Cord snarled, “Tell it!”

After a few false starts, Rob told it.

For months, Edward Wells had all his friends alert, waiting to see Cord in town without Anne. When it finally happened today, Edward shut his shop and he and Rob hurried home. Edward told Leona that the thought of a grandchild had made him realize he was wrong and want to reconcile with Anne.

As Anne had known she would, Leona had thought over the prospect of a grandchild herself after that terrible day at Ephraim’s. Although unable to see Anne again, she visited Martha during the week to tell her that she did not share her husband’s or son’s feelings about the baby and wanted Anne to know. Leona had admitted as much to Rob, but neither one of them said anything to Edward.

Now Leona was moved to tears by Edward’s change of heart, innocently believing every word. She didn’t seem to consider the appearance in the street of a team and carriage owned by Edward’s friend unusual. Edward, Leona, and Rob drove to the ranch, Leona happily anticipating her family reconciled again. Rob rode in grim silence, knowing and disagreeing with what he thought was his father’s plan.

The first difficulty was Anne’s attitude, for she came to the door with the Colt revolver in her hand. “You have no business here. Go home.”

Leona thought a simple explanation would move her daughter, but it did not. Unlike Anne, Edward could lie convincingly when he wanted to, but nothing he said alleviated Anne’s suspicion or unyielding attitude.

“I don’t care if you’ve had a change of heart. I haven’t. You can go to hell and so can Rob. If you want to act decently for a change, let Mother visit me here and in town without Rob sulking around in the background all the time. Neither of the two of you are welcome in my house or in my life.”

The argument went on and on until Leona was shaking with the cold. Anne was willing to have her mother come in and warm up, but Edward saw his wedge and used it.

“Your mother’s either going inside with all of us or staying outside with all of us. There’s no reason we can’t at least discuss this rationally. I never realized you had such an unforgiving nature. Don’t you think it would be better for everyone concerned if we began to work things out?”

“You and your friends tried to murder Cord right here in this yard. There’s nothing about it we can work out.”

But in the end her mother’s misery, standing in the bitter wind, moved Anne to let them in the house. Rob still hoped that her suspicion would prevail, for she did not put the pistol down. She let down her guard for seconds to reach for the coffeepot, however, and Edward jumped her, knocked the gun across the room and began to struggle with her.

Part of Rob’s great guilt was that he knew without his help his sister might have been able to fight free, but he helped his father subdue her. Edward even had lengths of rope ready in his pocket and soon had Anne’s hands tied behind her back, and when she continued resisting, her ankles.

Her fury shocked Rob. She cursed and swore in ways he never believed a woman could. So Edward gagged her.

The original plan was to pack enough of her things to heighten the illusion of her leaving willingly, but Anne’s suspicion had consumed a lot of time. Leona was too distraught to be bullied into packing. Rather than take a chance on Cord and Frank catching them at the house or on the road, Edward settled for merely putting the pistol away and leaving the note. They pulled into another ranch road to wait and actually saw Cord and Frank returning before heading back to Mason on the main road. Leona wept and protested and Rob again tried to make his father see the futility of the plan as he knew it, but to no avail.

Back at the house, Edward forced Leona to pack bags for the trip to Chicago. He pushed Anne into a chair in the parlor, and never took his eyes off her. Rob had never imagined hate could radiate from a person as it did from his sister that afternoon. The air in the room seemed smoky with it.

When everything was ready for their departure, Edward poured a dose of laudanum into a small glass and removed the gag to force Anne to drink it. Tied and helpless for almost three hours at that point, Anne had had plenty of time to think of what she wanted to say to her father. She spit the liquid in his face. He hit her with the same kind of blow he had used over a year before. Leona tried to stop her husband, and he backhanded her so hard she was knocked against a wall and fell. Rob was helping his mother up when the words began, venomous and hate-filled.

“You unnatural, miserable, mean-minded, son of a bitch, you can’t keep me in Chicago forever. When Cord finds out what you’ve done I hope he kills you the way his mother’s people kill their enemies, with a knife, inch by inch.”

Anne cursed her father in every way conceivable. She verbally assaulted his Christianity, his humanity, his morals, ethics, sanity, and his manhood. In the end Edward was driven to such rage he hit her a second time, and so forgot himself he told her - and thus Rob and Leona - what his real plan was.

“You think you’re just going to Chicago until you can run off again, don’t you? Not this time, daughter. As soon as we get there we’ll complete the paper work and have you in a private asylum. It will all be absolutely legal in case Mr. Ephraim Bennett tries to make trouble over his brother’s whelp. You’re going to stay right there, locked up and under guard with the other lunatics until we see some real indications you’re ready to rejoin the human race, and as for that mongrel you’re carrying, they’ll have it cut out of you before you’re there a day.”

Anne’s face had been flushed with anger. Now she went white. “You can’t do that.”

“Your aunt can. The arrangements have already been made with her friend Judge Davis. And as soon as I’ve been appointed your guardian, your *marriage* is going to be annulled.”

Rob tried to argue with his father, but that only brought out more horrifying details. Clara Wainwright had made all the arrangements. The day after the Wells family arrived in Chicago, Anne would be examined by doctors who would sign the required legal documents. The next morning there would be a short, predetermined competency hearing, and she would be committed to a private asylum. The doctors at the asylum were not unfamiliar with charges who conceived unwanted children. Families of patients knew abortion could be obtained - for a price. Anne would be free of Cord’s child before that night fell.

At first Edward would talk to Ephraim as if the child would be given to the Bennetts to raise after it was born, but after a month or two, he would tell the Bennetts that Anne had miscarried. Edward believed Cord would be indifferent about Anne and the baby and that his family would lose interest as soon as they knew there was no Bennett blood involved.

As Rob spoke, Cord felt the room begin to spin. He wondered wildly if it were possible for a man to die of fear just sitting in a chair. It had seemed merely a matter of going after her, bringing her home. Maybe some ugliness in convincing Edward Wells he no longer had any say in his daughter’s life. Definitely ugliness if he

had dared to hit her again. Bile rose in the back of his throat.

"You mean he'd risk killing her just to kill the baby?"

Rob wouldn't meet his eyes. "He says the doctors do it a lot. He says there no danger to her. She might not be able to have any more children is all. He doesn't think that matters."

"It's a whore's operation. They die from it - bleed to death - or scream their lives away from the infection after."

Rob shuddered as if he had been struck but made no answer. Cord hated liquor, hated the taste, the smell, and the effect it had on men, but now he reached out to the whiskey bottle, twisted off the cap, and poured a measure into his half empty coffee cup. He took a swallow of the foul mixture, seeing his own hands as if from far away. The whiskey left a fiery trail from his mouth to his empty stomach, but the room swam back into focus.

Rob looked deathly ill - gray and shaking, covered with a film of perspiration that shone in the lamplight. He said, "I didn't know. I thought he was just going to take her to Chicago and try to change her mind, and I knew he couldn't. I figured he couldn't keep her. It's not like when he locked her up over Detrick. She has you now, your whole family. I knew it was wrong, knew it would make a mess, but I couldn't bring myself to stand against him. It didn't seem like it would do any real harm. I never believed what you said it was like - last year. He said those other men got out of hand and he couldn't stop them, said you exaggerated anyway."

Rob's voice quavered. "I didn't mean what I said that day at Ephraim's. It came out because I was afraid. I knew how he'd be about a baby, but then he didn't seem too upset about it. Oh, God, I know she's happy with you. I've known it for a long time."

Still struggling for control, Cord managed only to grit out, "Finish it."

There was no comfort in the rest of Rob's story. Edward's words seemed to destroy Anne before their very eyes. She slid from the chair to her knees, begged. If he would let her go, Cord would take her far away. Edward would never have to see her or the baby. If he would just let the child live she would swear to stay in Chicago for the rest of her life and never disobey him in any way again.

Rob felt he was watching his sister dissolve. She had always been so proud, no matter what criticism or discipline she had been subjected to in the past. Through the fights with her father over marrying George Detrick, she had never once seemed cowed. Now she begged, weeping hysterically.

Edward forced the laudanum down her, standing over her full of self-satisfaction. Later Rob would realize he should have tried to get to Sheriff Reynolds, to Ephraim, to anyone who might stop the

madness. He should have gotten a pistol and tried to stop it himself, but that afternoon he followed his father's orders like a mindless machine.

As the drug took effect, Anne sobbed herself to sleep, crying Cord's name. They cut the ropes. Her wrists were torn and bloody from struggling, but Edward refused to let Leona take time to doctor them. They had wrapped Anne in a carriage robe for the trip from the ranch. Now Edward put one of Leona's coats on her and carried her to the carriage and the train.

Edward told the station master that his daughter was ill and had taken laudanum, and no one questioned his explanation. Rob returned the carriage to the friend who had lent it and came back to the house - to wait.

"I know there's no way to save the baby," Rob said. "The Tuesday train isn't soon enough, but surely you can get her out of there. Ephraim can do something, can't he? I'm afraid, Cord. The way she was - I'm afraid she isn't going to be Anne any more."

Cord said nothing, rose and headed for the front door. Rob followed. As he opened the door, Rob pleaded, "Please, tell me what you're going to do. Can Ephraim get her out?"

Cord turned then. He had little feeling to spare for Rob, but it ran through his mind that after this, Rob Wells would either finally mature into a man with the sense and courage to think and act for himself or forever become a useless weakling. One way or the other there was going to be some well-deserved suffering.

Viciously, he turned on the other man. "You agreed with your father from the beginning. I'm just a rutting savage who enjoyed your sister for a while when it was convenient. Why the hell should I care what happens now?"

Standing in the open doorway, Rob watched the tall form disappear within a few feet in the swirling snow of the ever-increasing storm, then stood there staring as if Cord would magically materialize again with a different answer. The cold eventually broke through his trance. He shut the door, turned and went back to the warm kitchen, shuffling like a very old man. He collapsed into his chair, took a large gulp of whiskey straight from the bottle, then another. Until the whiskey brought a kind of peace, he remained haunted by scenes of his sister in his memory, but the pictures of the lean dark man on the bright red horse were gone.

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Chapter 38

GENTLY RUBBING KEEPER BEHIND THE ears in the darkness, ignoring stinging snowflakes numbing his face, Cord forced himself to calmly consider his options. There would be other towns to the east, north, and south with trains running tomorrow or the next day, but he didn't know the schedules. Any attempt by him or even by someone outside the family like Windon might result in a telegram to Chicago. If Wells had any inkling anyone would come for Anne, he could make it almost impossible to find her, and it sounded as if he had friends spying for him all over town.

Denver lay sixty miles to the south and east. Trains would leave there daily. Without the storm such a ride would be unpleasant but not difficult; with it, it would be hell, and if the threat of blizzard materialized, impossible. The wind was howling out of the north now, making seeing more than a few feet difficult. The decision was his, and he would have to live with the consequences of a wrong choice.

He stopped rubbing the gelding's ears, pulled his slicker free and shrugged into it. It would help break the knife-like wind. In seconds he and Keeper were swallowed by the storm, heading out of Mason - south.

Even though the threatened blizzard never quite materialized, it was early afternoon, sixteen hours after leaving the Wells house, when Cord reached the slushy streets of Denver. He had pushed the big brown gelding to the limits of his strength, but the snow and killing wind had not let up until dawn. In places the drifts were so high the horse had had to lunge through. Snow and ice had encased them both, making just breathing an effort. Although the road was well traveled, it had often been hard to find it, for visibility didn't improve until the snow stopped.

Keeper was barely able to hold his head at knee level and was stumbling often. Cord had been on the ground for over an hour. When he first dismounted he was so stiff he almost fell. Now the combined effects of hunger and exhaustion were almost pulling him off his feet. His bones felt like spikes of ice embedded in his flesh, and walking had not stopped his shivering.

He had asked directions three times and was now walking south on Sherman Street, looking for a particular intersection and a particular house. The area was filled with stately homes on well-tended grounds. Surprisingly, no one had run from the sight he and the horse presented. Once again he covered the spent gelding with the slicker as he stopped in front of one of the big houses.

His knock brought a maid complete with black uniform, white cap, and apron. She was contemptuous. “The likes of you shouldn’t be here at all, but if you have something to say, get around to the back door.”

Cord swung the rifle straight up at her chest. He had to try twice before he could get the words out. “Get Howlett.”

The woman ran back into the house as Cord walked into the entrance hall. With any luck, Paul Howlett would be at home, not at his law office, on a Saturday afternoon, and he would not have to deal with Marie. It was indeed Paul who rushed to the hall to see what the trouble was. Cord had seen Paul only a few times many years ago, but would have recognized him instantly in spite of the silver now in his brown hair and extra lines around the brown eyes.

Paul also recognized his wife’s brother instantly. “I don’t believe it! Cord!”

Before either man could say another word, Marie was there. The years had been kind. No one meeting the lovely Mrs. Paul Howlett would ever suspect she was half Cheyenne.

From Marie there was no welcome. “Get out, or I’ll have you thrown out.”

Cord had had long, cold hours to decide how to force what he wanted from his sister. “You don’t know anyone who could throw me out. I need help, and you’re going to give it. If you don’t, everyone in this whole damn town will know exactly who and what you are before another hour passes, so help me God.”

Bright red spots appeared on Marie’s cheeks. Before she could speak again, Paul laid a gentle hand on her arm. “What do you need?”

“I need to be on a train to Chicago - yesterday. Got a horse outside all used up and needing help. He may not make it anyway, but I want you to try, and to get me to the train station.”

Paul looked at Cord, considering, then turned to his wife. “You go calm the servants down. I’ll take care of this.”

She opened her mouth as if to argue, thought better of it and went.

Paul went and got his coat and followed Cord out. Looking at the trembling, barely standing horse, he said, “This must be hellishly important.”

“It is.”

“All right. Bring him around to the stables.”

Behind the house in the spacious, airy barn, Cord ignored the scorn of the stableman and told him what he wanted done for Keeper while a stable boy helped Paul hitch a fancy chestnut horse to an even fancier phaeton. In minutes they were trotting towards

Denver's Union Station, the boy driving.

Cord had a good idea how Paul must feel about having a brother-in-law he hadn't seen in ten years show up on his doorstep, threatening Marie and making demands. And he knew if his normal appearance intimidated people, right now, with the twitch he could feel spasming along one cheekbone, his jaw clenched into ridges, and still shivering from head to toe, he'd probably scare the devil. Too bad. Paul and Marie could damn well deal with it.

After openly studying him for the first part of the drive, however, when Paul spoke it was with sympathy. "Can you tell me anything about it?"

"My wife's people came to the ranch yesterday when I was gone and took her - to Chicago. She didn't want to go."

Cord knew it wasn't enough of an explanation for the horse-killing hurry, for not taking the next train out of Mason, but the massive arches of Union Station were now in sight.

Paul said, "I've been telling Marie for years she needs to talk to you. You'll have to get the horse anyway. Stop back on your way home. I'd like to hear the whole story."

Getting ready to jump out of the phaeton, Cord forced himself to say more. "Thanks for the help. Tell Marie I'm sorry."

As he turned and started walking to the station, he heard Paul shout after him, "Think about it." He pushed through the station doors without looking back.

* * *

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Chapter 39

CHICAGO WAS WORSE THAN ANY nightmare Leona Wells had ever dreamed. Anne was locked in a bedroom that had been prepared as a prison, even to metal grates bolted over the windows. Leona herself was also a prisoner of sorts. She was not allowed to see Anne without Clara or Edward present, and an attempt to leave the house unobserved had had Clara's butler politely escorting her back to Edward like an errant child.

Leona tried again to reason with her husband, and he slapped her cruelly again. Long ago she had accepted that the handsome young man who had seemed so charming when she married him was an arrogant, selfish husband, but Edward had never been physically abusive to her or their children. He had crossed some emotional line last year in the yard of the Bennett Ranch. Leona knew now he would never cross back.

The doctors came to the house the morning after they arrived in Chicago to examine Anne and left smiling. They were usually called - and paid their hefty fees - by families that wanted insanity certified in troublesome but healthy relatives. Anne's deathlike stillness, white face, and refusal to meet anyone's eyes left the doctors with clear consciences. She made no response to their gentle, probing questions, only huddled with her arms around herself. Helpless under Edward's hard glare, Leona watched her daughter through a haze of pain.

Clara Wainwright did not physically resemble her brother. She was a short, stout woman with hair already turned gray, but her inflexible self-assurance was very like Edward's. Her sister-in-law had never been more than coldly polite to Leona, but now Clara was the only hope left. She managed to see Clara alone after the doctors had gone.

"Please, Clara, listen to me. Edward isn't telling you the truth. Her husband is a decent man from a good family. She loves him. It's a good marriage. Please don't do this."

Clara was no longer even polite. "You know, I told Edward years ago he should never have married you. If he'd just waited, with the shortage of men after the war he could have had his choice. You didn't inherit for years anyway. You were a silly, simpering girl, and now you're a silly, simpering old woman. It's probably your influence that's led to this mess, although I wouldn't expect even you to defend that wretched girl calling herself married to some aborigine savage. Don't you have any pride?"

Clara ignored the silence that followed her insults. "Why don't

you do something useful and come upstairs and help me see if we can't do something with your daughter. It's time she acknowledged we're acting in her best interests. I think dinner in civilized company tonight might make her stop this sulking."

Clara's attitude didn't soften one iota addressing Anne. "This kind of behavior isn't going to make any difference, you know. You'll just make things harder on yourself and all the rest of us. I'm going to allow you to have dinner with the family and my guests tonight, but only so long as you behave properly. Any fuss from you at all, and you'll be right back here until we leave for the courthouse in the morning. Do you understand?"

Mention of freedom from the locked room brought Anne's head up. Her throat worked convulsively, but she said nothing, just bobbed her head.

Clara said, "I can't believe how this has turned out. You know I see Richard and his wife quite regularly. She doesn't hold a candle to you in any way except commonsense, but they already have two children and another on the way. He dotes on them, and it could have been you. We've allowed you to make too many mistakes, and it's time it stopped. Now you pull yourself together and we'll have a nice dinner."

Clara then directed the maids to bathe Anne and dress her in one of her own dresses, which would be too short but would fit over her enlarged waistline. When a maid reported that Anne's passive acceptance had erupted into a raging fit at the sight of the corset, bustled dress, and accessories they had brought to her room, Leona feared even more ugliness. But, over Edward's objections, Clara merely waved her maid away and directed her to let Anne have her way in this. No extravagance of grooming or dress, she said, could turn Anne out properly tonight under any circumstances.

The dinner guests were the Honorable Bertram Davis himself and Clara's attorney, Bruce Abbott, who had prepared the paperwork demanded by Edward and Clara. Davis was a well-padded silver-haired man with an air of self-assured authority. Abbott was balding, short and thin, with jerky, nervous mannerisms.

Leona ate nothing herself and watched Anne push food around on her plate without even pretending to eat. Clara's ill-fitting dress was a greenish color that only emphasized Anne's pallor. When dinner ended everyone retired to the library. Brandy was poured for the men, wine for the women. Anne didn't touch the sherry either. Leona wondered if Anne had had anything at all to eat or drink since being dragged out of her own home. The servants left, shutting the door behind them.

Abbott then gave Clara a letter and began to review the points

he had made in it. He wanted, he said, to be absolutely sure everyone understood he was advising against the actions they were taking.

"You need to read that carefully, Mrs. Wainwright," he advised. "I know you're sure no one is ever going to know, but what if your granddaughter finds a sympathetic ear at the hospital?"

Clara cut him off, threw the letter on the coffee table. "Stop acting like the coward you are, Bruce. The ears at the hospital are all attached to greedy heads and hands that have been well paid not to listen to her."

Edward joined his sister in scoffing at the lawyer's reservations. More documents were laid out on the table. After a disdainful glance at Abbott, Judge Davis said, "Perhaps we should just sign some of these now and save time in the morning."

Edward seized on this remark, brought pen and ink from the desk, and the two men began to sign documents. Finished, they raised brandy snifters to each other in a cordial salute.

Anne hadn't moved since she was pushed into the chair. Now she rose shakily to her feet. In a forced voice that didn't sound like her own, she reiterated the offers she had made her father in hysteria at the house in Mason. If they would let her go, she would disappear. No one in Colorado would ever see her, the baby, or Cord again. If they would even just let the child live and indeed give it to the Bennett family she would live in any way they wished, would go or stay here, would obey every command.

Edward growled, "I don't want to listen to this drivel again. Call the servants and have her taken back upstairs."

Abbott, however, saw an opportunity to drive home his points. "You really should listen, you know. Among other things, the asylum is expensive. How long do you think you'll have to keep her there to ensure the obedience she's offering freely now?"

As Clara gave an amused, knowing laugh, Edward condescended to explain to the attorney. "One of the few virtues my daughter has retained through all this is her inability to lie convincingly. If you knew her, you'd realize it's written all over her face that if we agreed to this offer of eternal devotion of hers, as soon as his family had the whelp, she'd be running back to that savage the first chance she got. In addition to being uncommonly stupid, she's uncommonly stubborn."

Leona could no longer bear to see her daughter's bruised face. She forced her eyes away, looking vacantly around the room. The library was paneled and furnished in dark wood. The lamps and fire crackling in the hearth gave the room a warm glow, but to Leona the room felt like an oven. Trickles of sweat ran down her sides and

beaded on her lip. Hell would be like this room.

Resting her head against the back of her chair, Leona began to pray. She hoped God was not tired of her entreaties, for she had prayed with an intensity she had not known she was capable of every chance she got since those terrible moments in her daughter's home. She prayed that there was some hope in the fact that her husband insisted on underestimating a man like Cord Bennett so badly. Once Leona herself had hated and feared Cord as a monster and a demon. Now she prayed that God would give him strength, give him wisdom, give him wings.

A tiny movement caught her eye. The doorknob was turning very slowly even as Clara's attorney continued arguing with Edward and Clara. Leona closed her eyes, afraid to hope.

"But you can't keep her locked up forever," Abbott said. "If nothing else, she'll outlive you. How long are you planning on keeping her there?"

"As long as it takes to be sure she's given up any idea of going back to that redskin."

"And how long do you expect that to be?"

The door swung open, and Cord's voice filled the room. "She'd still be spitting in your eye when hell froze over."

Tears scalded down Leona's cheeks. Sometimes God listens. Sometimes He sends a miracle. This was her own.

The sound of the words turned the room's occupants to statues. He was there beside the door, back to the wall. Dark from head to toe in the shadows, Cord was almost indistinguishable against the wall, but the threat of his presence chilled the room. Firelight reflected off the metal of the rifle pointing straight at Edward Wells.

Cord softened his voice as he addressed Anne. "Thought I'd see if you want to come home with me, babe."

She crossed the room in two leaps and threw herself at him. Cord kept the rifle trained on Wells, but he caught Anne with his left arm and crushed her to him. He buried his mouth and nose in her hair and breathed deeply of her.

Until this moment there had been no room for any emotion but fear in Cord. Now, with Anne safe in his arms, rage seared through him. If they did not get out of here quickly, he would leave the room drenched in blood.

Cord started Anne toward the door just as the Honorable Bertram Davis made a furtive movement, trying to shield the papers on the coffee table from view. Pushing Anne gently back against the wall, Cord walked into the center of the room. "Give me the papers."

Davis no longer looked self-assured or authoritative. Still, he

didn't just hand over the papers. "Those don't mean anything to you or your wife now. There's no reason for you to want them."

Cord enjoyed shoving the rifle barrel against the man's teeth. A dark spot appeared on the judge's lower lip and turned into a thin trail of blood. "Give."

With shaking hands Davis gathered the papers and handed them over. Cord stuffed them in his coat pocket, then used the rifle barrel to lift the edges of the judge's suit coat, exposing more documents in the inner pockets. "Give."

"Those have nothing to do with you. So help me. Please, leave them."

This time Cord slammed the rifle into the judge's diaphragm, knocking his breath out in one ugly gasp.

"Want to die for those papers?"

Wheezing as he drew air painfully back into his lungs, Davis surrendered the last of the documents.

Now Cord was unable not to face Edward Wells. Whatever his faults, Edward was no coward. He met Cord's eyes with an unflinching, matching hatred for long seconds. Finally, straining with the effort, Cord forced himself to back away. He tipped his hat towards Leona, then pulled Anne out of the room.

Leona never realized her last prayer was out loud. "Dear God, thank you. Thank you."

* * *

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Chapter 40

THE HANSOM DRIVER CORD HAD given a week's earnings and promised a week's more waited in the street. In less than an hour they were on a train again, headed west. Everything should have been fine, but it was not. As the miles passed, Cord's concern deepened to worry, then to fear.

Rob Wells' words reverberated in his mind: "I'm afraid she isn't going to be Anne any more," for the woman with him was not the creature of fire and spirit he thought of as a tigress.

In her aunt's too big dress and the shabby maid's coat Cord had simply stolen off a peg in Clara's kitchen and replaced with a ten dollar bill, she looked small, thin, and colorless. One side of her face was bruised and swollen. Worse, she clung to him like a frightened child. She asked no questions, answered his only in lifeless monosyllables, would not let him go, yet would not meet his eyes. Coaxing only got a few bites of food down her. The extra money he had spent for the sleeper car on the two-day trip was wasted, for Anne would not sleep. She just leaned against him with blank eyes, staring into space.

He had had no intention of stopping back in Denver. If Keeper lived, he would get the horse later or have someone else do it. Now he began to reconsider. Just as trains only left Mason twice a week, they also came in only on Tuesdays and Fridays. They would have to lay up somewhere, and in Denver there would be no risk of a strange doctor. Howletts' doctor could be looking at Anne days before they could get back to Mason.

There was also the fact that he was now a fugitive. Both Clara Wainwright and Edward Wells would file every criminal charge they could think of, and Cord could think of quite a few himself. They weren't going to be able to just pick up their lives again. Aside from trouble with the law, Edward Wells was not going to let go of his obsession. It had come down to killing Wells or eluding him, and Cord had in Clara Wainwright's library faced the fact he could not deliberately kill Anne's father. They'd stop in Denver he decided. Marie would just have to live with it.

At Union Station Cord looked around uncertainly. Transportation might be a problem here.

A youthful voice called out from behind. "Mr. Bennett, Mr. Bennett," and Cord turned in surprise to see the stable boy who had helped Paul ready the phaeton approaching. The boy didn't look too sure of himself. "Mr. Howlett said this afternoon was the earliest you could get back and sent me to watch for you. He said to bring

you back to the house." The youngster eyed them nervously.

Knowing the picture they presented, Cord felt some sympathy, but all he said was, "Obliged. We'll follow you."

There was no conversation in the carriage, and the boy let them off at the front of the house. It was still daylight, but what warmth there had been in the day was fading as the sun lowered toward the mountains. His knock brought the same maid to the door, but this time she was polite. "Just one moment, please."

Paul strode eagerly to the front hall, Marie following more slowly and with obvious reluctance. The wide smile on Paul's face faded fast, but Cord had more to worry about than Paul's feelings.

Paul asked with concern, "What can we do?"

"We could use a bath, maybe some hot food, sleep." Remembering Anne's wrists, Cord added, "And ointment for burns if you have it." Mention of a doctor had had her distraught on the train. That could wait until after some sleep.

Howletts had a beautiful, deep bathtub, and when Anne showed her first signs of animation, climbing in with alacrity and beginning to wash with vigor, Cord began to feel better until he realized this was not normal bathing. She was scrubbing as if to remove her very skin and gave no sign of stopping. In the end he had to lift her, struggling against him, out of the tub and wrap her in towels.

When servants emptied the tub and refilled it for him, and he turned his back for seconds to take off his own clothes, she was in the bath again, scrubbing even more furiously. It came to Cord that he had heard Martha and Hannah talk about Marie washing like this after almost being raped. He pulled her out of the water and wrapped her in towels a second time. "Stay there or I'll hogtie you, understand?" She turned her head. He waited until they were back in the bedroom, food had been brought, and they were alone for the night before tackling the problem.

Anne would only take a few swallows of soup, but Cord's appetite was back with a vengeance. He cleaned the plates. With the comb out of his saddlebags he untangled her hair, then dressed the wounds on her wrists and faced her.

"You told me you were all right, but I've heard about that washing business before. What did they do to you?"

She looked steadily at the sheets. "Nothing. I'm fine."

"The hell you're fine. Tell me."

Mute, she just shook her head. He reached for her, thinking to hold her, try to get a response with a kiss, but she fought him. "No, no, don't. You can't, you can't touch me like that. It's no good. We're over."

He didn't force her close but didn't let go either. Holding her

firmly by the lower arms, he waited until she stopped struggling. She still would not look at him.

"If we're over anyway, what's the difference if you tell me? Don't you think I deserve to know why?"

She started trembling then, but didn't answer. Frantically searching through everything he knew had happened, Rob's words came to his mind again, and with them a tiny glimmer of light. "Must have been something in Chicago. Rob told me everything happened back home."

Panicked eyes met his for an instant before jerking away. "No, not everything."

"Yes. Everything."

She broke then, sobs shaking her, and didn't struggle when he pulled her against his chest. Too much strength could be a curse, leaving a person unable to bend, only break. Don't let it be that way for her, he prayed. Let her be whole again.

"It was my fault. I shouldn't have let them in. And then, then, when he told me, I turned to jelly inside. I knew it wouldn't do any good, but I begged him, begged, on my knees." The sobs were shaking her so hard he was afraid she would tear apart.

"Annie, Anne…."

"I knew it was no good, knew it wouldn't help, and I did it anyway."

He wondered whether anything he could say would help, if there were words that could ease her pain, and knew he had to try. "My love, listen to me…." He held her hard until the great gulping sobs lessened to smaller shudders. "Letting them in was a mistake, babe, just a mistake. Nobody gets through life without judging wrong sometimes. It's a matter of whether you can fix things and go on, and we've fixed this. We're all right again, so it's over."

She quieted a little more against him, and he knew she was listening. "You did do some good. Not with your father, but with Rob. When I got there he was so crazy with guilt he told me all of it, and it was because of you that he felt that way - told me. He could have lied, told me only what he had to."

"You'd have forced him to tell."

"I'd have forced him to tell where you were, but I didn't know to look for more than that. If he hadn't told me all of it, I wouldn't have known I had to hurry, that time mattered so much."

Her face was wet against him and her breathing ragged, but the sobs had almost stopped. She was listening intently now.

"Annie, last year…. That day in the yard…. I made a mistake not strapping on a gun the minute I found you, and it wasn't that I was against marrying you, it was that I was against letting them

make me do anything. So they almost killed Foxface and threatened to shoot the horses, and I gave in. But they could have shot everything in five miles to pieces and couldn't have made me crawl."

A tremor passed through her, but he continued. "That was last year. Now if somebody pointed a gun at you, really could hurt you, I'd crawl on my belly or my knees or do anything else. Maybe that's part of why loving is frightening. I'd rather pay the price and have you than be invincible because I have nothing."

He held her away from him. Tears slipped down her cheeks, but she met his eyes steadily. "When Rob told me, I thought maybe I'd die of fear sitting there. Begging to try to save the baby isn't your shame, it's theirs - for doing that to you."

She whispered, "It wasn't just the baby. It was you. To never see you again, never touch you, never be touched, knowing you'd think, you'd think - it would be worse than being dead. Even if I got away from them, how could I come home? How could I just come back and say I let them do that but now I want you to love me again?"

He shook her gently. "Listen to me, listen, there's nothing anybody could do to you that would make me not want you - no hurt, no scar, *nothing*. These past days I've been afraid they broke you, ruined all the fire. I'd mourn, Annie - I don't want you different - but I'd still want you. I love you."

Her hands reached for his face then. "I thought you'd believe the note. I thought you wouldn't come."

"I don't even know when I stopped believing you'd go. Maybe in the hay meadow, maybe after the race when you were sassing me about it. I always knew you wouldn't sneak away like that. You'd tell me to my face."

"I believed them - that even if you wanted to you couldn't get there in time. The storm, the trains."

He smiled at her then, a real smile he let lift the corners of his mouth. "You should have known better than that."

"Yes. I should have known better than that."

Her tears had stopped, but he kissed every bit of her face anyway. "How about I get some more food for you? Maybe soup stuff?"

"No, I can't…. Not yet."

"Then will you stop fighting it and sleep?"

"Yes. I promise."

He spooned her tightly against him and fell asleep almost instantly himself, knowing she was at least on the way to healing.

First light was only turning the room from black to gray when

something woke Cord. Anne was not curled against him but watching him, her face only inches from his on the pillow, her eyes huge in the dim light. She still looked haggard and drawn, a long way from right.

"Did you sleep at all?"

"I only woke up a few minutes ago."

"It's not enough. Go back to sleep."

She reached out to him then, feelings clear in her mobile face, reflecting and reinforcing her words. "I can't. I need you."

Dismay brought him all the way awake. "No, it can't be right. You need more rest, a doctor…."

"No, I need you. Please, Cord."

He wanted to hold her, protect her, cherish her, but there was no physical desire in him. She looked so fragile. She needed his love, not his body, and that he could give her.

He slid gentle kisses across her face, felt the delicate skin of her eyelids, tasted the honey of her mouth. For long seconds he simply pressed his lips to the fluttering pulse point of her throat, grateful to have her there, warm and alive against him. He touched as lightly as he could, trying not so much to speak with his hands as to whisper. Her face, her throat - he pushed her hair aside, turned her on her side and slid kisses around to the nape of her neck, down her spine, across the sensitive skin under her arms, beside her breasts.

She gloried in the sensations, sighed his name, soaked in his touch, as he continued trying to love each inch of her skin separately. He tasted her here and there, rubbed first his cheek then his forehead against her ever so lightly. By the time he was once again at her face, he found it streaming with silent tears.

"Don't cry."

He tried to kiss away the tears, but they came too fast. He licked around her eyes then, washing away the hot wet drops. When he kissed her, the taste of her tears turned from salty to bittersweet. He cupped her face in his palms and began to tell her, to tell her just how much he loved her, how life without her would be just a prison sentence to serve, one joyless day after another to be gotten through somehow. He told her how she filled his life with color, light, and warmth, with the music of her voice and laughter, the grace of her movement.

Too much of his life had been lived in a withdrawn and silent way, but now he let go of the last of his reserve with her forever. As he whispered of love, the touch of her, taste and scent of her, sound of her, even her need, ignited the fire he thought he could not feel. He slid into her gently, drinking in the love she gave so freely as he possessed her. Afterwards, as he lay beside her, he could see in her

face that he had in the end freed her, of the pain, of the shame, and of the rage.

Spent, they lapsed almost immediately back to sleep and didn't wake again until afternoon - fourteen hours after they shut the bedroom door on the world.

* * *

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Chapter 41

THE HOWLETT HOUSE WAS ALMOST as large as the Wainwright mansion, yet when Cord left the bedroom and made his way downstairs he didn't hear or encounter a single servant. The silence surprised him because last night the place had teemed with them. On the first floor he turned down the hall at the foot of the stairs toward the sound of voices.

Close enough to overhear the conversation, he understood why servants had been banished. Paul and Marie spoke in the dulled, weary tones of people who had each been making the same argument futilely for some time. The first clear words were Marie's, edged with exasperation.

"I mean it, the sheriff would only make it worse. You have no idea what he's like."

Nearer now, Cord could also hear all of Paul's answer. "Darling, we have to do something. I'm telling you I know what I saw. Those are *rope burns* on her wrists and her face is swollen - bruised. And I don't believe the servants are making it up. He threatened to *hogtie* her right here in our house. The way she looked last night - we have to help her."

Cord rarely took advantage of his own silent ways to eavesdrop, but waiting for a pause in the conversation before walking into the room had to be the lesser evil now, and Marie was already speaking again.

"It isn't just a matter of my secret. You have no idea how it would be. People would get hurt, and you or I might be among them. When we were children he was never mean in any way, but he's always been - unstoppable. There's no way we can help that woman. Nobody can until he's through with her, and that's that. Martha said she seemed happy enough with him all told, and trying to interfere will make it worse."

"My dear, he's just a man. We have to do something. You can't expect me to allow this in my house."

It was nice to know Paul wasn't buying any killer demon theories Frank or Ephraim had passed on anyway. When the unhappy silence stretched out, Cord walked into the room.

Paul gave a start and looked discomfited, aware they had probably been overheard.

Marie might believe every ugly story the rest of the family told, but she didn't pretend a personal fear she didn't feel. She said acidly, "Good afternoon. You certainly must have needed a rest."

Cord didn't see any reason to explain himself. "Been a long time

since either one of us got much sleep. Is there a place in town I can get Anne some clothes? She won't wear what she had on last night again."

Marie's eyes narrowed, and she exchanged a brief glance with Paul. They might suspect an excuse to keep them from seeing Anne, but Cord was more than willing to let his sister try to get Anne into one stitch of Clara Wainwright's clothing again. The hollow-eyed stranger he had brought here last night had disappeared, and the tigress was back. She'd come down here naked sooner. He waited, half-expecting Marie's reaction.

"She must be hungry. Can she wear some of my clothes and come down and eat?"

"Might not fit. Last year she wore things you left at the old house, but she's more than five months with child now."

Surprise erased some of the angry look from Marie's face. She didn't ask further permission, just gave a tug on a bell cord and told the maid who answered the summons, "Send Elise in, please." When another woman in uniform appeared, Marie gave detailed instructions. "Do you remember the clothes that were delivered a year or so ago that were all too big? I had some redone, but some were just put away. Go through those things and give Mr. Bennett clothing for his wife. Choose things that would fit me loosely or be large. She needs everything - everything, you understand?"

Remembering Anne's stories about life in Chicago, Cord watched this roundabout way of getting things done with interest, then followed the openly contemptuous maid upstairs. If her nose were any higher in the air, she'd trip and fall.

Elise stopped at the bedroom door. "You wait here."

Cord leaned against the hall wall, looked at the many doors opening off it and felt no envy. Anne had lived this way once and didn't want to again, and he agreed with her.

Elise returned with a pile of clothing folded neatly in her arms, topped with a hairbrush and extra hairpins. Her scowl was if anything more disapproving and purposeful than before. "I'll just take her these."

Enough of this nonsense was enough. "The hell you will. Give me that stuff and go scrub a chamberpot."

When Cord returned with Anne to the sunny little room Marie had referred to as the breakfast room, Howletts were warned, for Anne had kept her shoes. She glanced back at Cord uncertainly over her shoulder as she entered the room, worried about her welcome. He increased the gentle pressure of his palm in the small of her back just a little, encouraging.

Paul started to rise, saw Anne, and fell back in his chair, too

astonished to speak or move again. Marie struggled just as openly to accept the transformation. Paul showed signs of recovering first, glancing sharply at Cord, then back at Anne, and at Cord again.

The maid had chosen a deep wine colored skirt and a contrasting pink waist. The swelling was all but gone from Anne's face, and the colors only emphasized her vibrancy, the glow of her skin. Maybe some would argue she was not really beautiful. They might say the big gray eyes took up too much of her face or that her nose was a little long, her mouth a little wide, but men would turn in the street to look again. Only a very few women ever looked the way Anne looked now, and they had to be loved to achieve it - to be loved and to know they were loved.

Paul was seeing what Frank had on the rainy day when Anne lit up the kitchen as she worked over beans and peaches. Frank had refused to accept what his own eyes saw, but a slow understanding was replacing Paul's initial amazement, helping him regain his composure and remember the manners of a lifetime.

This time Paul made it to his feet. "My dear, do sit down. It's good to see you looking so much, so much…."

He faltered, and Anne gave a soft, throaty laugh.

"The very look on your face tells me how horrible I looked last night. You probably were wondering why Cord would go after such a dreadful piece of goods."

Paul looked momentarily lost again, but then simply ignored her comment and said, "You must be famished. Dinner will be ready soon, but would you like breakfast instead?"

"Actually, we're so hungry anything sounds wonderful." She smiled sweetly, her face lighting up even more. "Thank you for helping us. We were so tired we might have passed out in the street."

Once they were seated, Cord paid no further attention to Paul or Marie, just leaned back and watched his wife. There were still traces of the emotional ordeal of these last days, but she was herself again. Both the fire and sweetness were back. Their lives were going to be turned upside down over this, but nothing else mattered. She was whole again.

He realized Paul was addressing him. "The horse isn't doing well. Burt seems to think it would be a kindness…."

Cord closed his eyes, feeling sadness wash through him. He had tried to stay on the right side of the line and thought he might have succeeded and Keeper might recover, but he had never ridden a horse like that before.

He opened his eyes and met Anne's. "Keeper?"

"Afraid so."

“They told me it was coming on a blizzard that night.”

“Never got that bad. Stopping snowing by dawn.”

“How long did it take you?”

He hedged. “Little longer than good weather. I was up here by one.”

She wasn’t letting him get away with it. “How long?”

“Sixteen hours.”

“Two to Mason and then sixteen here?”

“Mm.”

“We’d best go see him as soon as we’ve eaten.”

There would be no way to make her stay here and let him take care of it. He watched her take up the conversation with Paul and Marie again. She skillfully turned aside several inquiries about what exactly had happened. She wasn’t ready to talk about it yet, and no one was going to hurry her.

Keeper didn’t look any better than he had the morning Cord first walked into Denver. Burt, the stableman, automatically loathing anyone who would so use a horse, was unsympathetic over the couple’s concern now. “Best to shoot him. He don’t drink much and don’t eat at all. Just stands like that all the time.”

Armed with several lumps of sugar cadged from Marie’s cook, Anne was not listening and was already in the stall petting and hugging the big gelding, explaining to him as if he were human. “Poor Keeper, you don’t understand why this happened, do you, but I was in so much trouble, and I needed help right away, and because you got Cord through the storm everything’s all right again. All you have to do is forgive us and get better and you can come home with us. If you don’t start to eat, you’ll have to stay here, you know.”

The horse didn’t acknowledge her presence with so much as a flick of an ear, but Burt gave Cord a speculative look, stopped frowning at him, and disappeared. In the end they spent more than an hour in the barn, currying and brushing the horse until the rough and staring coat laid a bit, leaning against the manger and talking in low voices. Anne believed both a soft touch and reassuring presence helped and saw no reason not to spend some time here.

Cord said, “Could be nothing will work this time. I used him hard, and I knew I was doing it and went ahead.”

“I know. If I had to choose between our baby and a hundred horses, I’d choose the baby, but that doesn’t mean we can’t spare some time to comfort an old friend now.”

“So long as you can handle it if it’s no good. He doesn’t look any better than he did when I got here.”

“Well, look at it from his point of view. You did that to him for no reason he knows of and then left him in a strange place with

strange people. Maybe he just needs a little loving."

"Mm. Cure me of plague that way."

An impish grin crossed Anne's face. "You mean I should be waiting until you're sick?"

"Hell no, I'm all for preventative medicine. Speaking of which, let's ask Paul about a doctor…."

She interrupted, "No. I'll see Dr. Craig when we get home if it will make you happy, but I'm not having somebody I don't know touching me now." Her jaw stuck out stubbornly.

Seeing Craig if the law was after him might take some doing, but they would manage it somehow. "No fuss about Craig when we get home?"

"I promise."

After a dinner that Cord considered inferior to Anne's cooking, in spite of the numbers of servants required to produce it, and after much fussing because Cord couldn't be talked into brandy nor Anne into wine, everyone settled down in a wood-paneled book-lined room in deep leather chairs. Providing tea for Anne and coffee for Cord before dismissing servants for the night had finally satisfied Paul. He relaxed in his chair over brandy. Marie didn't look any happier than she had all day.

Cord had decided to tell his sister they'd leave in the morning and let her at least go to bed with that much peace of mind when Paul spoke. "I can tell you two are reluctant to speak of what brought you here, and I want you to know I've put my curiosity aside. We won't mention it again, but tell us, how are Frank and Ephraim and the rest of the family?"

Anne had abandoned any ladylike poses and curled up in the big chair like a contented kitten. She gazed at Paul solemnly, her eyes still looking large in her face. "You don't have to contain your curiosity, Paul. I'm willing to tell the tale now. I just needed some time. To understand it you have to know how we got married first. Did Martha write you about that?"

Paul exchanged a quick glance with Marie. "A little. Somehow I think there's more to it than what she wrote."

"Let me tell you about that first then."

Through half-closed eyes Cord watched them, Marie stiff and unhappy, Paul eagerly listening, and Anne with expressions flitting across her face as she talked, hands fluttering, voice rising and falling in what seemed to him a musical lilt. She told it well. Leaving out a lot of the ugliest details, she still gave them a feel of what it had been like, the seeming inevitably of death, the worse pain of not dying but living.

There were occasional exclamations from Paul, but Marie said

nothing until Anne got to Frank and Ephraim's first visit. Suddenly Marie was upright in the chair, wide-eyed, unbelieving. "*You* ran *Frank* out of the house?"

"Frank and Ephraim. They made me so angry. You should have heard them. I was trying to explain, and they told me to shut up I was too stupid to listen to. They're probably lucky I didn't shoot them. I was that mad."

Marie started to laugh then, no polite titter, but a real laugh that soon had her holding her sides. "Oh, my, I'd give anything in the world to have seen that. Frank…." She dissolved into more paroxysms of laughter.

Cord had never expected to see Marie again, much less hear her laugh. It sounded good, very good.

Anne finished that part of her story with the first trip to town, and then mentioned the fight in the spring. She looked at Cord, "Did you know my father paid those men? They were supposed to take me and kill you or leave you in no condition to do anything about it."

He shook his head. "He admit that to you?"

"Boasted about it. About how it made him realize he had to do it differently. He was so, so *smug*, so sure of himself."

"Mm. She who laughs last."

She smiled for an instant but then said, "We're not going to be laughing are we? They'll have filed charges against you before we were out of Chicago. We're going to have to run, aren't we?"

He'd hoped it would take her a while to come to that, but should have known she'd figure it out pretty quickly. "We'd have to go anyway. It's either kill your father or go, and if I didn't kill him over this I'm not going to."

She closed her eyes and took a deep breath and began telling Paul and Marie the story. When she got to where they were all in the library in Chicago, she stopped.

Without urging, Cord told of returning from town with Frank, getting Frank to agree to send Riley, and then realizing the note had to be a forgery. He told of his talk with Rob over the whiskey bottle and of the decision to ride to Denver. The ride itself he glossed over in a sentence.

In Chicago it had been easy to find a cab driver to help for enough money. In fact the man entered into the spirit of things and advised Cord to enter the house from the back. He said the windows and doors the servants used might not be secured, and sure enough, there had been an unlocked window off the kitchen. Cord had expected Anne to be confined in a bedroom, attic, or basement, but heard voices in the library as he stole through the house.

He stopped there, giving Anne a nod that told her to finish the story, which she did in a few sentences.

Marie was no longer looking withdrawn and angry. Paul was plainly indignant on their behalf. “And you think now they’ll try to have you arrested? They won’t be able to make charges stick.”

Cord drawled, “Don’t have to. Probably wouldn’t be too safe in prison waiting for trial if Mrs. Wainwright and Wells put me there.”

Paul sat frowning. “What were the papers the judge didn’t want you to have?”

Cord shrugged. “Never looked at them. I only took them because he seemed so fond of them. They’re still in my coat.”

“Do you mind if I look at them?”

After Cord fetched the papers, Paul read them all before looking up. “Small wonder he was frightened. You aren’t going to have to worry about arrest or anything else from these people. If you want to, you can have the lot of them in prison for the rest of their natural lives.”

Anne uncurled and sat on the edge of her chair. “Explain please.”

“Gladly. First, there’s a letter from Mrs. Wainwright’s lawyer, a Bruce Abbott. It sets forth exactly what she directed him to do and advises her of exactly how it’s illegal and what the consequences would be if they were caught.”

“She’ll say she never saw the letter.”

“Yes, but *he’ll* have to testify to the truth to save himself. Then they have all the documents - to have you committed, to have the marriage annulled. The most damning thing is they signed these documents. There has to be a court hearing, Anne, and there wasn’t, and the judge signed these papers already. Your father signed an annulment petition as your guardian, but there hadn’t been a hearing appointing him yet.”

“Can’t they just say there was a court hearing?”

“No. There are too many people involved - court clerks, secretaries. These papers are pretty clear evidence that they were conspiring. And if your mother, your brother, or Abbott would tell the truth - they kidnapped you, and what they were going to do to you…. There isn’t a judge or jury in the country that wouldn’t want to hang them and end up throwing the book at them.”

Paul looked from one to the other. “My suggestion is that you allow me to put these in my safe and that tomorrow morning we send some telegrams. If they were worried about Ephraim, it would be good for them to hear from another lawyer, and we might as well let them know as soon as possible that you know what these papers represent and what you can do with them.”

Cord exchanged a long look with Anne. Then he turned to Paul, “We aren’t going back to Chicago for a trial, so it isn’t a matter of getting them jailed. Can you use those papers to get any charges against me dropped?”

Paul nodded grimly. “You bet I can.”

Standing then and stretching, Cord said to Marie, “I know you don’t want us here. We’ll see about a hotel tomorrow and take a train home as soon as we can.”

She gave him a genuine smile. “If I had a gun, I’d have shot you that first day, but it seems the servants are accepting you’re the son of an old friend of Paul’s. I’d like you to stay a while - really.”

She surprised him, but even after all the years he knew her well enough to see she meant it.

Before they went to bed, Anne insisted on visiting Keeper once more, holding the sugar in the horse’s unwilling mouth until it dissolved. As they left the barn Cord looked back and saw the horse’s haggard, drooping outline in the moonlight. Tomorrow he would have to find a way to visit the barn by himself - with a gun.

* * *

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Chapter 42

CORD ROSE AT THE FIRST SIGN of light the next morning, slipping noiselessly from Anne's side. Sometimes he was glad Anne slept more soundly than he and awakened more slowly. He padded softly out of the room, rifle dangling from his right hand again.

There was already activity in the barn, nickers and banging as Burt fed eager horses. Standing in a shadow, Cord watched Burt dump a measure of grain into the feeder of the fancy carriage horse Paul had driven him to the train station with. As the barn quieted, Cord stepped out of the darkness, startling the old man slightly, but then Burt grinned. "If you brought the rifle for your horse, you're too late. Should have done it yesterday."

It made no sense. The horse was bad off, but not enough so to die overnight by himself.

"Don't believe me? Come on and see."

The two men walked down to the far end of the barn, but before they came to the last stall Cord could see Keeper's gaunt shape. The big gelding was busy licking the last grains of oats from the feedbox.

Burt was as pleased as a doctor showing off a miracle cure. "Looked in on him first thing this morning, and everything in the stall was gone - hay, grain, water - he was starting on the bedding. I hung an extra water pail in there. Needs as much as he can get I figure."

Cord walked closer, leaning over the open upper half of the door. The big horse spotted him and left the feedbox to come over and give him a hard nudge in the shoulder.

"Looking for sugar, I expect."

"I'm not the one in the family that carries sugar." Cord gave the gelding an affectionate rub behind the ears.

"Never thought much of it myself. Never thought much of talking to a horse like it was human either. That lady of yours might have changed my mind. That true what she said yesterday about her being in trouble?"

"Yeah, it's true."

"I owe you an apology then. I guess that lady's worth riding down a whole bunch of horses."

Cord looked into the seamed old face and nodded. "Yeah, she is." His gaze returned to the horse. "I feel like the people in the Bible must have when Lazarus got up and walked off, but I don't know why I'm surprised. She's done it before."

Burt chuckled and started to return to his work. "She must be

pretty handy to have around."

The house was beginning to stir as he headed back for the bedroom. Sounds of servants chattering and laughing came from the kitchen. He was leaning the rifle back against the wall when Anne's voice came. "I didn't hear a shot."

Sitting on the edge of the bed looking down at her, he took her hands in his. "That's because there wasn't one. Damn horse is chowing down everything he can get his mouth around. Only problem will be if he goes into another decline because I didn't have any sugar for him. What are you going to do the first time it doesn't work?"

"Feel terrible and cry."

Whatever he might have said next was lost when he felt a distinct flutter against the back of one of his hands where they rested against her stomach. He started a little. "Is that it?"

"No, that's not 'it'. That's our son or our daughter."

He freed his hands then and spread one right across her belly, centered where the movement had been. Intent and still, he was rewarded by another little series of flutters.

"He stopped."

"She stopped. You can't expect her to exercise to exhaustion just to entertain you."

"Made up your mind this is a girl?"

"No. I don't want to call my own baby 'it' is all, so one day I think he and the next day I think she, and that way I'll be right half the time. Today is a she day."

For the most part, they had avoided the subject of how either of them felt about the coming child these last weeks. He pulled her to a sitting position now, holding her tight against him, one hand still spread across her stomach. "I knew it would be hard, but I didn't expect it to be this bad."

"They already had it planned. It had nothing to do with the baby really."

"Maybe not, but it's still going to be hard. Paul's probably right about them backing down on the criminal charges, but your father's not going to give up. We're still going to have to leave."

"I know. But if we're not fugitives, at least we'll have time to pack and take things we want. Maybe it will be easier without both our families at us all the time. Do you realize that our friends haven't said anything except they're happy for us - it's our relatives that have caused all the trouble?"

It was true. As word of Anne's condition spread through Mason, Cord had had his hand shaken more times in the last weeks than ever before in his life. Anne was fussed over by people as diverse as

Helene LeClerc and Virginia Stone. In the middle of her father's store, Rachel Ross had publicly defied her husband by hugging Anne.

There were also a lot of dirty looks and low-voiced scathing remarks, of course, but the people making them seemed unimportant, just the usual haters. She was right about that - their friends were happy for them, and the rest didn't matter.

"Annie, on the train, there was too much time to think. Mostly I was scared out of my mind what they'd do to you if I couldn't stop them, but there was something else too. I felt like they were stealing more than just you - something else that mattered. It surprised me. It - she - isn't hardly thickening your waist much yet, but I already feel something - possessive, protective - I don't know."

Her hands cupped his face, thumbs caressing his cheekbones. "I love you, Mr. Bennett."

"Good thing. Hate to be the only one afflicted."

Several kisses later, she at last asked him. "What's wrong with your family?"

"Ah, well, my family think they're going to have to raise our daughter themselves. Frank and Eph aren't getting any younger. They'd probably rather not."

"What! That's absurd. Where are we going to be?"

"I imagine there are several theories."

"Like what?"

"Once you get big and fat and not so much fun, or once the baby comes and disturbs my sleep, I'll stop being merely occasionally mean to you and turn into a real bastard, and you'll leave me, and your family won't let you keep my child, so…."

"I should have shot them when I had the chance."

"Mm. According to that note, your family must have had the same notion. And then, of course, if you're stubborn and don't let me drive you out, I could just get so fed up I'd throw you and the offspring out in that snowdrift you mentioned once. Have about the same effect."

"Ephraim must be a dreadful lawyer if he insists on clinging to insane notions in the face of so much evidence." Then she questioned one thing particularly. "How are you going to feel when I'm big and fat and not so much fun?"

"Don't suppose I'd like it much permanently, but I think you'll look kind of cuddly when you waddle."

"I will not waddle!"

"All women waddle at the end."

"You rat." She belied her words by snuggling against him, kissing his neck. "Do you suppose they'll admit they're wrong before

she's eighteen?"

"Wouldn't bet on it."

"Maybe life will be easier far away from them all."

It damn well wouldn't, and Cord knew it, but he didn't say so.

After breakfast Cord and Paul left for the telegraph office, and Anne spent some time with Marie. In spite of widely disparate views of almost everything, Anne found she liked the other woman.

Marie told Anne she could hardly believe she was the same Anne Wells who had once pulled Priscilla Carson off her.

Anne said, "It's a coincidence of sorts, but I don't see why you find it that amazing."

"From the story of how you got married, I don't see how Cord could have arranged it, but somehow I bet he did."

"What on earth are you talking about?"

"For weeks after that business in school all he talked about was you. That good, brave, kind, pretty Wells girl. I finally got so jealous I told him I didn't ever want to hear your name again, and so he stopped talking about it, but that doesn't mean he stopped thinking about it." Marie studied Anne with furrowed brows. "It's just too much to be a coincidence."

This tidbit from long ago delighted Anne. "Well, I always rather liked him after that too, you know. I never believed half the things people said about him."

THAT NIGHT, ALONE IN THEIR bedroom, Paul and Marie discussed their visitors as they prepared for bed.

Paul said, "Darling, I have to tell you, all the stories, all the letters, I thought your brother was a cross between Lucifer and one of those renegade Indians the government is always after, but I *like* him. I *really* like him. You should hear some of his stories about Anne. He calls her the Tigress and makes it sound as if Atilla the Hun should be afraid of her, and then it's clear he feels sorry for the rest of the world because she's his. I haven't laughed so hard in years. Do you know that if the baby's a girl she hopes it looks like you?"

Marie looked at Paul's kind face with affection. She felt little passion for this gentle man who had rescued her from a life she was desperate to leave, but she had come to love him dearly in other ways.

"No, she didn't tell me that, but she told me she wants a boy to look like Cord. She thinks he's *beautiful!*" Just saying this started Marie laughing again. "I think she probably believes he can walk on water. I couldn't even picture in my mind a woman that would suit him. I didn't believe there was such a thing, and today I realized

he's probably been in love with her since they were ten years old." She explained about Priscilla Carson.

Paul grinned at her. "Evidently Frank and Ephraim don't even think he likes her. They think he puts up with her because she's handy. He's so humorous about it I thought I'd fall out of the carriage."

"You know this is the way he was years ago. Not the last years before I left, but when we were young. Relaxed, easy. Too quiet for most people maybe, but fun to be around."

"You really need to get off by yourselves and talk, sweetheart. It's long past due."

Marie looked away. "He probably hasn't changed his mind. It will just open all the old wounds."

"I can't force you, but I think you're wrong. You should try."

"We'll see."

In the end Cord and Anne stayed four days with the Howletts. Marie was totally frustrated by her efforts to take Anne shopping. Anne always ricocheted off in some other direction before they made it to the dressmaker's or the milliner's.

The first time it was a men's shop, where she happily purchased yards of an elegant black suiting material for another suit for Cord and enough material for several white and cream colored shirts. She made no mention of the fact that her own family, in the business, wouldn't even sell her such goods. Marie exchanged a knowing look with Cord, thinking of what their sister Hannah would say about him dressed either in black or white.

The second shopping trip halted when Anne spied a small bookshop. What astounded Marie was that her brother didn't just put up with this, he participated. The two of them looked over every book on the shelves before purchasing two neither had read before. Cord was only against "more poetry stuff."

Anne objected, "Shakespeare is poetry, and you read that."

"That's not that romantic foolishness like the rest of what you've got."

She turned around, held out one hand, and said:

"'Take him and cut him out in little stars,

And he will make the face of heaven so fine

That all the world will be in love with night….'"

It should have had him so embarrassed he'd be walking out of the shop. Instead he looked her right in the eye and replied, "You, woman, are 'Past hope, past cure, past help!'"

Marie had done almost no reading since her marriage, but Ephraim, Frank, and Hannah had drummed the classics into her as well as her brother, and she recognized both quotes from *Romeo and*

Juliet readily enough. She also understood now what Paul was talking about. She laughed so hard her stomach hurt.

On the last day, she went for a walk alone with Cord. After a considerable amount of meaningless small talk, they came to the heart of it.

Cord said, “I was wrong. If you’re happy, that’s all that matters.”

Marie was surprised by his admission. “I didn’t think you’d really changed your mind.”

“Guess I did years ago. Having Anne made it even clearer. If pretending would keep her safe, I’d do it in a minute.”

“But not for yourself? If you had the face, the skin, and could, wouldn’t you rather change things for yourself, get out of that hell?”

He broke off a twig from a winter-barren tree, and chewed it thoughtfully. “I never thought of our life as hell. It seemed good to me, and I never understood why you wanted something different so much.”

“How can you say that? The letters I’ve been getting for years, the way Frank and Ephraim talk when I see them - why do you think I never came back even for a visit? After I got over feeling angry at you, even if I’d believed you wouldn’t still be angry, they made it sound so awful, going on and on about how bad you were - bitter, withdrawn, mean.”

“They’d probably write those same letters again today. We got kind of crossways. It’s a little better now, but there are still some things they can’t see.”

“How can they still think those things? I feel like a fool for believing them myself. Anybody can see it’s not true.”

“You know how it is. You make up your mind about something, and then you stop seeing anything that doesn’t fit the way you already think things are. Did the same thing myself for a long time - with Anne.”

“Maybe it’s time to tell them they’re wrong.”

“Pretty hard thing to tell. What do I do, sit them down and tell them I’m not really a mad dog killer, not really the meanest son of a bitch alive, that I’m smart enough to care about my wife? They’re grown men. They’d better figure it out for themselves.”

“What if they don’t?”

“Guess they won’t have a chance now anyway. We’re going to have to leave Colorado. Paul may have taken care of the law, but Wells isn’t going to give up. His next move may be a bullet in the back from a rooftop, and Anne’s as likely a target as I am. I should do something about him, but I can’t see explaining to this baby someday that I killed his grandfather.”

“He must be crazy.”

“Maybe. Anne says it’s not just even he’s one of the haters. It’s that she defied him and got away with it. He can’t stand losing. Probably it’s some of each.”

“Where will you go?”

He shrugged. “Haven’t even started talking about it yet.”

They walked slowly back towards the house, but Marie stopped and threw her arms around him in a hard hug. “I am so glad to be friends with you again. No matter how much I told myself it didn’t matter, it did. The heartache was always there.”

He hugged her back equally as hard.

Before they got back to the house she said, “I suppose you aren’t going to tell me how you managed to end up married to the Wells girl after all this time?”

Cord actually smiled at her, taking Marie back to that long ago simpler time of childhood when smiles hadn’t been rare, then he said, “Just got lucky.”

Marie shook her head. Only her brother could almost get killed and consider himself lucky.

On the morning of the fifth day Cord and Anne started for home in a cozy, covered buggy that Paul swore he never used. Still gaunt and looking hard-used but with a resolute gleam in his eyes, Keeper headed out at a ground covering trot. They took three days to get home because of the horse’s condition, and the only incident was that in order to get a room the second night Cord had to pull a gun on the hotel owner. But that was all right. There was no sheriff, and the night passed peacefully.

* * *

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Chapter 43

THE CLOSER THEY GOT TO home, the more anxious Anne became about what they would find. She knew that when Cord had left more than a week earlier, he had told Frank to sell off all the stock. How many of the animals would be gone already?

As the buildings came into sight, her heart lifted. Daisy and Rose were grazing behind the barn. Fortune flagged his tail and bucked his way across his own pasture at the sight of the buggy. Foxface only gave a few barks before recognizing Keeper and coming running to escort them the last of the way to the house.

"It doesn't look like Frank sold anything yet, does it?" Anne said as Cord pulled up in front of the house.

"Nope. He wasn't too happy about the whole thing. Probably put it off." He gave her a sympathetic look. "We're going to have to sell them ourselves, you know."

"I know, but we'll try harder to find decent buyers than he would." Anne was already wondering about the chances of convincing Cord to stay, at least until spring. After all there was all that hay in the barns they'd worked so hard to put up. And surely they could stay home and guard against her father for a few months, couldn't they? Luke and Pete would be happy enough to bring anything they needed from town.

As Cord lifted her down from the buggy, Riley came out of the house, then stood there as if turned into another post on the porch as she walked up to him and threw her arms around him in a big hug.

"How are you, Riley?" she asked. "Cord says you were hurt, and here you are, taking care of things for us. Are you all right now?"

"I never been hurt so bad I couldn't milk a couple of cows and feed some pigs and chickens," the old man said indignantly.

Then he turned to Cord. "Frank's been half crazy, boy. He needs to know you're back."

"You can tell him," Cord said. "'Preciate you staying here and taking care of things."

"It's Frank you owe the thanks," Riley said stiffly. "I'll be on my way now."

Anne looked at Cord and saw his slight shrug. "You go lay down. I'll help him saddle up."

"I can saddle my own damn horse!" Riley groused.

Anne went inside chuckling to herself. Babysitting milk cows, pigs, and chickens had sure made the old man grumpy.

AFTER HEARING WHAT RILEY HAD to say, Frank Bennett felt something close to despair. He poured himself a double shot of whiskey, turned his desk chair around so that it faced the window and stared out into the yard, seeing nothing.

When Judith came up behind him and pressed a kiss on the top of his head an hour later, she pulled him away from his own dark thoughts. He turned back around and put the empty glass on the desk.

"What's wrong?" Judith asked.

"My *brother* is what's wrong," Frank said. "It was stupid of me to ever think things could be better, but I did, and that's when he turned his damn back and walked away. So now it's been long enough to get used to that idea, and he's back. Riley says he drove up to the house bold as brass with Anne beside him. Drove up in some covered buggy Riley's never seen with Cord's saddle horse looking half dead but pulling it. There are fresh scars on Anne's wrists - rope burns he says. Riley's seen enough rope burns in his life, he should know. He always stuck up for him, you know, through all the rest of it. He looks like an old man tonight. A beaten old man."

Something uncertain flickered across Judith's face for a second, but all she said was, "So what are you going to do?"

"I don't know. My *brother* told Riley to tell me to leave them alone for a couple of days. They're tired he says. Damn him. Damn him to hell a thousand times."

"There's not much we can do anyway, is there?"

"No, not except to tell him we don't ever want to lay eyes on him again."

"That won't help her, and the baby…."

"He'll let her go once there's a baby spoiling his fun. We'll end up with the baby anyway. You know that."

Frank saw the uncertain look on his wife's face again, but furious as he was at Cord and much as he loved his wife, he didn't want to listen to her irrational fears. The truth was bad enough. He got up. "I can't stay here and let it eat at me. I'm going to ride in and talk to Eph. At least it will be a misery shared."

"If you'll take the buggy, I think I'd like to come too."

In the end Luke and Pete rode along, unusually quiet and subdued.

Hearing what little Frank had to tell, Ephraim was frustratingly pragmatic. "All right, Frank. Let's assume the worst. She left. He got mad and went after her. We all know she'd put up one hell of a fight if she didn't want to come back, so he forced her, tied her up, dragged her back, and she's got scars to show for it. Now, what can

we do about it?"

"Not much, but I'm not going to pretend it didn't happen or that it's all right. It won't make a damn bit of difference what we say or how we feel, but I guess I'm going to have to tell him just how ashamed he makes me."

"You want to go running out there like we did last year?"

Frank grimaced. "No."

"What do you believe, Frank? What do we all believe?" Ephraim looked around the table.

Martha answered first, calm and sure. "I don't think he'd hurt her. I'm going to have to see proof that he did."

Martha's attitude might be no surprise, but Judith's was. "I agree with Martha. He wouldn't hurt her."

Frank was astounded. "And when did you come to that? For God's sakes, Jude, you've always thought…." He couldn't finish.

Judith was firm. "I came to it this summer. He wouldn't hurt her. I know he wouldn't."

Frank knew Luke and Pete had spent a lot of time in Cord's company this summer and fall. Now he saw the full extent of the change in their attitude towards their uncle.

Luke said, "Pa, I've got to tell you, all the things you've ever said about him - he's not like you say. He's actually easier going than Uncle Eph. All those times Pete and I tried to start a fight - we realized this summer the only way we'd have ever got him to fight was to jump him, and even then he might have walked away. He's just not…."

Frank interrupted, "That's not telling me what you think about this."

Pete said, "Yes, it is really. What Luke's trying to say is not only that we don't think he'd hurt her like that this time, but that it's not in his nature to hurt her - ever."

Ephraim said, "I guess you and I are the doubters for sure, Frank. I think he's capable of it, but I sure as hell don't want to believe it, and I guess I'm not going to until I hear her say it or something. I'm not jumping the gun like last year again. I mean it seemed what we thought had to be true then too, didn't it? There wasn't any other explanation. Only there was."

Frank admitted, "I don't want to believe it either. I don't want to believe it so much I can't even decide what I do believe, but now what do we do? Hire Pinkertons?"

"I know patience isn't your forte, Frank, but I say we wait the couple of days and then go talk to them, and we don't go charging in name-calling like last time."

Ephraim was right. Frank wasn't a patient man, and this didn't

sit too well with him at all. When the boys decided to shore sagging spirits with a visit to their old saloon haunts, he was tempted to go with them, but in the end he stayed at the house and chased his own thoughts in painful circles all night.

Breakfast was a quiet affair. Frank could tell he wasn't the only one who hadn't slept well. Nobody had much to say. The knock on the door offered a welcome diversion until Frank saw who walked in.

Noah Reynolds introduced the stocky, middle-aged man with him. "This here is Marshal Jessup. He's a federal marshal, and he's got a warrant for Cord. We know Cord ain't been out at the ranch lately. You know where he is?"

Without stopping to think, Frank said, "No, he left more than a week ago. Gave us the impression he didn't plan on coming back. You know Anne left him."

"Yeah. Everybody in town knows that. Left for Chicago on the train with her folks. That's what this warrant's for. Breaking and entering, assault, kidnapping. He took Anne out of her aunt's house in Chicago, broke into the house, beat up some judge while he was at it. It's bad, Frank, real bad. If there's any way you can help get him in custody without people getting killed it would be a blessing. They'll get him in the end. You know that."

No matter his private opinion of anything Cord had done, Frank wasn't giving his brother up to the law. "We don't know where he is. Sit down and have some coffee while you're here, Noah. What else do you know?"

Noah didn't even consult the marshal, just lowered himself heavily into a chair. "That's all I know, and I'm having a lot of trouble with it, I don't mind telling you. Seen a lot of them two this past summer, and I can't believe she left him to start with, and I can't believe he did what they're saying to finish with."

"She did leave him. I saw her note."

"Well, I just plain have trouble with it. I'd have bet you couldn't drag her away with a team of horses."

Luke lifted tired eyes from his empty breakfast plate. "Pa? Last night when Pete and I were talking around, we heard some things. Strange things. Anybody interested?"

Knowing Luke would not give away his lie, Frank nodded.

"Wells' shop hasn't been open since the day Anne disappeared. Mr. and Mrs. Wells went to Chicago with her, but Rob's in town. They say he was drunk for days. Nobody saw him except when he went out for another bottle, and after that he still didn't leave the house. Mrs. Wells came back on the train two days ago by herself, and she and Rob were in Miles' store buying groceries. He looked

like hell but he was sober, and she looked like an old lady, like she could hardly walk without leaning on him. Maybe it wouldn't hurt to talk to Mrs. Wells. She'd know what really happened, wouldn't she?"

Marshal Jessup's voice was soft and pleasant, but no-nonsense. "I'm not here to investigate, just to make an arrest. There's a warrant, you understand."

Ephraim was already on his feet. "Yes, we do understand, but you can't arrest him if nobody knows where he is now, can you? I think I'd like to talk to Mrs. Wells."

Seconds later the whole family was getting ready to go. Frank looked around in dismay. "Now wait a minute, we look like an invading army."

Martha was having none of that. "I'm not sitting home waiting to hear second hand, and Leona has certainly received enough hospitality in my house to return a bit of it."

A check of all the Bennett faces showed no one was willing to wait to hear second hand. With a resigned grunt, Frank gave in, and he and Ephraim led the way up the street. In the end, the two lawmen trailed after them.

* * *

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Chapter 44

FRANK BARELY RECOGNIZED THE WOMAN who answered the door as Leona Wells. She had indeed aged twenty years since he'd last seen her. Deathly white skin looked like parchment and was only emphasized by the black dress. Standing behind his mother with a comforting hand on her shoulder, Rob also showed signs of change. The soft, boyish look was gone. His skin was grayish and eyes looked haunted.

Leona didn't even give a greeting, just started spilling one question after another without waiting for answers. "Have you seen them? Is Anne all right? I've been afraid. Afraid she'd lose the baby after all. Did they get back safely? Please tell me what you know."

With the marshal behind him, Frank told only the literal truth. "No, we haven't seen them." He let Leona see the marshal. "This is a federal marshal, Marshal Jessup, and he's here to arrest Cord - kidnapping and a bunch of other charges. We'd like to know what happened."

"No! They withdrew the charges. I know they did. That's why Edward killed himself."

Frank stiffened with surprise and heard a startled gasp behind him.

Rob said, "You'd better come in, Frank, Ephraim. All of you."

They were barely all seated around the dining room table, when Rob started the story.

"I'll tell you what happened," he said. "I was there for most of it anyway." Rob narrated the events in a low monotone. The deadness of his voice seemed to add to instead of detracting from his tale. No one else said a word. No one asked a question. Ignoring the presence of the women, Rob told it all, even Cord's last ugly words as he walked away, and it was then that Rob lost control of his voice and pain slipped through.

"I should have known better than to believe him. I *did* know better, but I felt so guilty all I wanted was to climb into that whiskey bottle, and that's what I did. Then Mother got back and told me he'd gotten there in time somehow. He was less than twenty-four hours behind them. How the hell did he do it? Can you tell me that? How did he do it?" Rob searched Frank's face as if the answer would be there, but Frank just shook his head.

Leona then began describing the events in Chicago in a strained but steady voice. "They summoned the authorities that night, of course. That's when they filed charges. They were in a panic. Clara had her maid sleep in her room that night and from then on right

until I left. Edward wouldn't admit the effect it had on him, but you see it seemed almost supernatural. They were sure it couldn't be done, and yet he was there, and he was - your brother is…."

Frank almost felt sympathy for the people who had been in that room - almost. "We know. We know what he can be like."

"Yes. Well, the judge was worried about the papers they took, but Edward and Clara were sure he just took them out of spite and neither he nor Anne would realize what they had. When the telegram came from Mr. Howlett, Clara was stunned, just stunned, and Edward was crazed with rage. Within an hour after the wire was delivered, Judge Davis was at the house, and then Mr. Abbott. They had telegrams too. They were screaming at each other. In the end, Clara and the judge said they would withdraw the charges and do nothing more. Edward wouldn't agree. He said he would prosecute, and then Clara and the judge told him they would fix things so he couldn't. To have his sister use her influence on his behalf was one thing, but to have it used against him was something else." Leona's voice fell to a whisper. "I really think my husband was insane at that point. They argued and fought all day. That night after we were all asleep he took a pistol and…."

Leona paused, then began again with more strength in her voice. "It was the combination, I think, of Clara turning on him, and Cord and Anne winning. That's how Edward looked at it - they won. He left a note blaming all of us."

Rob took hold of her hand. "Mother…."

"No, I'm all right. Let me finish. Clara arranged to have him buried in Chicago. Suicides, you know - well, I thought it best to let her do that, since she could. I got on a train to come home right after the funeral."

Leona looked now at the sheriff and the marshal, "So you see, I *know* the charges were withdrawn. They were all lies anyhow. Someone's made a mistake."

The marshal rose and picked up his hat. "Maybe since there were several days between the filing of the charges and when they were dropped, word hasn't come down. I think I'll go over to the telegraph office and see what I can find out. Never hurts to be sure." He tipped his hat to Leona. "Sorry to have to meet you in such troubled circumstances, ma'am."

Noah left with the marshal. "We'll let you know as soon as we hear something," he said as he walked out.

When the two lawmen were gone, Frank could finally reassure Leona. "I'm sorry we couldn't tell you before, but we didn't want that marshal to know. None of us have seen them, but they came home yesterday afternoon. One of my men was at the house taking

care of Cord's stock, and he saw them. Anne looked fine. They said they were three days getting home by buggy from Denver."

Relief flooded across Leona's features, and Frank turned to Rob. "That's how he did it. Rode to Denver that night and took a train from there."

Rob didn't want to believe it. "But the storm - the wind - it blew all night and drifted. He couldn't…."

Frank got to his feet, buttoning his coat and pulling his hat down low. "If he couldn't get through and he had to lay up, it wouldn't have been any worse than sitting here waiting for a train, would it? You and your father never understood what you were up against from the beginning. A ride through hell wouldn't even give him pause if he wanted something on the other side."

Frank walked out then followed by the rest of the family, only Martha lingering to give Leona a quick hug.

Frank and Ephraim walked side by side in the lead.

"Remind me if anything like this ever happens again to realize the answer is probably something totally beyond my limited imagination to conceive of will you, Eph?"

"Do you need reminding? You were lying through your teeth for him this morning."

Frank shrugged. "I didn't hear you giving him up. It comes to me if I saw him commit a murder myself, I'd still be there trying to stop the hanging. It's not even right, but it's the way it is."

"He must be feeling a little of that kind of thing himself. I wouldn't have expected him to react that strongly to a threat to the baby. You weren't wrong in what you said to Rob about a ride through hell. I remember what it was like working cows in storms."

"Yeah. I'd say we're not going to have to worry about raising the child ourselves after all - and maybe that's just as well. I'm too old to deal with whatever Cord sires out of that woman. It scares me."

Ephraim laughed out loud. "It's probably going to scare all of us. If he's as indifferent a father as he is a husband, Anne's going to have to deal with it herself, and she may be tough, but she's not that tough."

"Odd thing, he believed that note when I was there, and he was going to just walk away. Maybe he doesn't care that much about her, but nobody is going to hurt her or steal her. I suppose the day he first said 'my wife,' you could figure on that."

"He's always had a possessive streak. I guess that's why I didn't find it that hard to believe he'd go after her and drag her back."

Luke's voice broke in, excited. "Pa, look at that. That's Willie."

"What are you talking about, son?"

"There, by Dr. Craig's office. That's a strange buggy, but the horse is the one Anne calls Sweet William, you know, Willie."

Frank gave quick orders. "Everybody keep walking. No matter what that marshal says about sending telegrams, if he finds them right here in town he may change his mind. Luke, when we get up near the doctor's, you and Pete slip over there. You get hold of Cord and Anne and get them over to the house as quiet as you can. Try not to tell him about the marshal. We don't need him on a rampage."

ANNE HAD KEPT HER PROMISE to see Dr. Craig without a fuss, but she couldn't help feeling it was only fair when Luke and Pete showed up at the doctor's. If she had to put up with Craig's exam and the way after saying she was fine he started in with all sorts of cautious hedging about taking it easy for a couple of weeks, Cord could just put up with his wretched family. Except of course if he decided to put up with them, she would have to also. At least there weren't going to be more accusations of the kind Frank and Ephraim had made last year. Along with everything else Luke and Pete were spouting to try to cajole Cord in agreeing to a visit at Ephraim's, they mentioned having talked to her mother - and Rob.

"Is my mother all right?" Anne asked.

She didn't like the looks the two of them exchanged before Luke said, "Sure. She looks a little - strained - maybe, but she's fine. Rob said…."

"I don't want to hear his name," Anne snapped. "I don't care what he said."

Luke and Pete finally fell silent, and Anne saw the way Cord was looking at her.

"Oh, no," she said. "I'm *fine*. Let's go home right now."

"A little rest at Eph's wouldn't hurt."

"No. I'm…." Before she could begin arguing seriously, Luke and Pete had her by the arms, talking over her, escorting her out of the doctor's and up the street.

"No, we can't just leave Willie here. I'm…."

Cord walked over to Willie and simply led him along behind them as Luke and Pete continued gently ignoring her protests.

Once at Ephraim's, Anne stopped resisting. She hadn't seen Martha, Judith, or Ephraim for almost two months, and their welcome hugs and worried questions erased a lot of her reserve. Emerging from Ephraim's bear hug laughing, she said, "I'm fine, really. We've been to Dr. Craig, and he says I'm fine and the baby's fine. He says expectant women are tougher than anybody realizes."

Ephraim kissed her cheek. "Well, if *ordinary* expectant women

are tough, that probably means you're rawhide."

Frank was the only one not sharing in the general welcome. In fact, he was frowning. "For God's sake, sit down, Cord. We've got some serious talking to do."

Anne was barely seated next to Cord at the kitchen table, when without warning, the door opened behind them, and Frank's right arm blurred with motion. He was focused on whoever had walked into the house, and the look on his face changed him into a frightening stranger.

Turning to look, Anne saw Noah Reynolds and another man with a badge and her heart leapt to her mouth. There could only be one reason the lawmen were here, and Anne frantically tried to think of a way out of what was coming. Tense silence stretched out until Noah Reynolds spoke.

"Seems like you've located him after all, Frank."

Frank said nothing, didn't move. The marshal looked only at Frank. "Mr. Bennett, you wouldn't by any chance be doing something as foolish as pointing a pistol at me under that table would you?"

Frank gave what should have been his usual charming grin, but this time it didn't reach his eyes. The stranger he had become had a reckless, dangerous look. Anne realized she was finally seeing why people who knew Frank Bennett had trouble believing she had run him out of the house last year.

Frank's soft voice was a stark contrast to his usual manner and to the look on his face. "If you've got any notion of arresting anybody around here who doesn't want to be arrested, then I just might get downright stupid."

Cord said, "If it's me you're starting a gunfight over, you want to tell me what the hell's going on?"

Frank's concentration didn't waver and he didn't seem inclined to speak. Ephraim explained, ending with, "He said he was going to send a telegram back East to check, but I suppose he's here thinking to arrest you now and worry about the telegram later."

Noah said, "Damn the lot of you. I convinced the marshal if we saw Cord and he gave his word to stick around while we got this straightened out, he'd keep it. Now the whole bunch of you are acting loco."

Cord said, "That might be a hard promise to make, Noah. Wells isn't going to leave it until I'm dead or Anne is. We figured to rest up a while and then pack and disappear."

There was an uneasy silence after these words. Anne could tell there was something else no one wanted to tell them. It was Jessup, tight-lipped over the current state of affairs, who finally said, "Wells

is dead, Mr. Bennett."

Cord's eyes narrowed. "These charges of yours include murder?"

"No. He committed suicide in Chicago a couple of days after you left."

"Annie?"

"I'm fine. My father died for me a long time ago." The lump in her throat belied her words and surprised her. Once she was alone she would have time to mourn the good things she remembered from her childhood. There had been good things, hadn't there?

Cord got to his feet and faced the marshal. "Then there's no problem. If we don't have to worry about Wells coming after Anne again, we'll stay and fight the charges anyway. We don't want to leave here. You've got my word."

They shook hands, and Jessup said, "Your sheriff's been telling me arresting you would be a lawman's nightmare, but when I walked in here I thought he was worried about the wrong member of the family. It always amazes me how often two like you crop up in the same family."

Cord said, "Our father once remarked on the same thing - said we were flip sides of the same bad penny. Happened he was more than a little peeved at us both at the time."

The hard lines of the marshal's face relaxed into a smile. "Your father must have been a perceptive man. Sheriff Reynolds and I figure you got a train out of another town that night. Are we right?"

Cord nodded and said only, "Yeah, you are."

Frank eased the hammer on his pistol down and added in the still too soft voice. "Denver."

Jessup said, "Doesn't surprise me somehow. I feel I'm walking out of a wolf den in one piece by the grace of God." He glanced at Anne. "Just what you need to be doing, adding to this family."

"My influence will be gentling."

There were at least three derisive snorts around the room, and Jessup laughed out loud.

"We'll get it worked out," he said. "I'll let you know as soon as I get an answer to my wire."

When the lawmen left, tension seemed to drain from the room.

"Toss me one of those little cigars, will you?"

"Why the hell don't you buy your own?"

"Filthy habit, hate to start." Cord plucked the cigar out of the air as Frank threw it. With the cigar in the corner of his mouth, he searched his pockets for a match, and finding it said, "You surprise me, Frank."

"Like the marshal says, I get foolish now and then."

Cord struck the match, then paused. “Got to tell you, Frank, over all the years, you never struck me as particularly foolish.” He brought the match to the cigar tip. “You’ve got a foul temper you can’t seem to get a hold of.” He shook out the match. “You’ve got a reckless, crazy streak that would scare hell out of a sane man.” He took a pull on the cigar and let the smoke out, and then one side of his mouth pulled into a sardonic half smile, “and, of course, you’re mean as a snake.”

Frank’s jaw dropped open as Anne gave a half-smothered giggle. Then Ephraim gave a shout of laughter. Soon the whole room was rocking and howling, except for Cord, who laughed only with his eyes, and Frank, who was too red-faced to get past a grin.

* * *

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Chapter 45

THEY ALL WANTED TO KNOW about Denver then, about Marie and Paul. Cord let Anne do the telling, but Ephraim asked him directly. “Does this mean you and Marie buried the hatchet?”

“Yeah, you could say so. They thought we’d be leaving here, but she said if we weren’t she’d like to visit, see the baby. Maybe in the spring or summer.”

Martha said, “A letter is overdue anyway. I’ll write and let them know - once everything’s settled.”

The men headed for the parlor, and Cord said he’d go let Leona know Anne was all right. As he expected, Anne showed no desire to see her mother if it meant going back to the Wells house. He turned at the door. “Annie, why don’t you go lay down? You won’t miss anything.”

“I’m not tired.”

“Indulge me.” He knew at once he’d made a tactical error. Maybe she’d kept her promise to see Craig without a fuss, but she thought he was being overprotective and was about to say so.

“If I indulged you, I’d spend the next four months wrapped in something soft and fuzzy being carried back and forth between the bed and the rocking chair. I imagine for exercise you wouldn’t mind if I cooked a little, so long as I didn’t do anything really strenuous - like beat an egg.”

He toyed with the brim of his hat. It was a matter of whether he wanted to do what was necessary to get her to take a nap. Craig might have said she was all right, but he also said it wouldn’t hurt to be extra careful for the next couple of weeks. What the hell. He kept his face and eyes carefully expressionless. “I happen to know my daughter is tired. Been bouncing around in a buggy too many days in a row and got upset over Craig poking at her like that.”

If they were home she would undoubtedly tilt her head and tell him he could have his own way if she could have a kiss, and if she pulled that here and now, he was going to grab her and kiss her until she passed out. Perhaps she saw the determined glint in his eyes. She regarded him steadily, also poker-faced. “You two certainly established an instant rapport.”

“Blood tie.”

“All right, drat you. Your half of this baby can have a nap. My half isn’t so delicate.” She was gone with an exaggerated swish of skirts.

Martha said, “Do you have any idea of the kind of surprise your brothers are in for sooner or later? Or are you doing it on purpose?”

Cord put his hat on and pulled it low, hiding his eyes. “Grown man walks around with his eyes shut tight, he shouldn’t be surprised if he bumps into something he didn’t see. You aren’t trying to convince anybody of anything they don’t want to believe.”

Martha laughed. “You win. I just hope I’m there when the blind men hit the wall.”

ROB ANSWERED THE DOOR AT the Wells house. He avoided Cord’s eyes, and his only greeting was, “Why bother knocking this time?”

Cord didn’t reply, just followed Rob to the kitchen, where Leona was trying to start lunch with shaking hands. Seeing Cord she sank to a chair at the same table where he’d sat with Rob what seemed like a lifetime ago.

Looking up at him with swimming eyes, she asked, “Is she all right?”

“Fine. We came in to see Craig, and he says she’s fine and so’s the baby.”

“That marshal….”

“You slowed him down. He’s checking back East to see what’s what.”

“Did they tell you?”

“Yes, Mrs. Wells, I’m sorry it came to this.”

Leona seemed to gather strength from these words. “You didn’t cause any of the trouble right from the beginning, and neither did Anne. I choose to believe that my husband was suffering this last year and a half or so from a brain disease, or a growth, or something. But however you look at it, you and Anne have done the suffering and bear none of the blame, and I know that.”

“Will you be all right?”

“Yes. Robert will open the shop again Monday, and finances are no problem. We’ll be fine.” Her voice thickened. “Can I see her? How does she feel?”

“Maybe not today. There’s been enough excitement for a while, but next time we’re in town, sure. She knows whose side you were on. Fact is we were a little worried about leaving you there. Thought later maybe we should have brought you out with us.”

“They were too busy tearing at each other to bother with me.”

“Glad to hear it, ma’am.”

“Would you call me Leona?”

“Guess I might manage it.”

Rob had been listening quietly, but now he asked, “Tell me one thing. What you said when you left here, were you just getting even, or were you afraid I’d send a wire?”

Cord examined Rob carefully, noting particularly the new

firmness around the mouth, the loss of the petulant look. “Little of both, I guess. If you’d had another change of heart it might have taken me years to track her down - if she lived through it.”

This seemed to satisfy Rob, but he asked then, “And how does she feel about me now?”

“She won’t speak your name and doesn’t want to hear it.”

Rob’s throat moved convulsively. “And you?”

Cord shrugged. “You didn’t have to tell me the whole truth that night, so I guess as far as I’m concerned we’re even.”

“If you can make her listen at all will you tell her how sorry I am?”

“Already have.”

Cord started to leave then, and Leona rose, surprising him with her hands on his arms. “Before you go I have to tell you something.”

He waited, looking into the pain-filled, pale face.

“In all my life I have never been so glad to see any human being as I was to see you that night. From here to the grave, I’ll never forget how I felt. I am proud that you are the father of my first grandchild.”

There was no answer to that. “Take care of yourself, Leona.” He let himself out.

* * *

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Chapter 46

THE NEW RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN HER husband and her mother had Anne almost gritting her teeth with envy, for Leona adopted Helene LeClerc's ways and thought nothing of greeting her son-in-law with a kiss every time she saw him.

It was also no time before Anne learned from Luke and Pete, who kept no secrets, that when they accompanied Cord on his Sunday visits, her brother was now included. In fact it sounded as if the four of them were having Sunday afternoon poker games while she visited with her mother, Judith, and Martha. She felt no forgiveness toward her brother, but said nothing to Cord either. Rob was still keeping company with Nancy Lee Weinert, and the whole town expected an engagement to be announced after an appropriate lapse of time after Edward Wells' death.

Things were also better with the Bennett family. There was unquestionably a new ease among the three brothers, and if Frank or Ephraim occasionally made remarks that showed they had not changed their attitude about the marriage, Anne was finally able to adopt Cord's way of handling it - she ignored them.

Cord suggested they give Leona a buggy horse for Christmas. Anne thought it was a grand idea and threw herself into the project with enthusiasm. She chose a chestnut gelding she named Reynard for her mother. When she realized Rob was going to take part in the gift by sneaking Molly's old harness out of the barn for inspection and repair and getting the buggy to the carriage maker for a going over and sprucing up, she almost balked, but in the end she said nothing.

They decided to present the horse to Leona on the morning of Christmas Eve. Cord told Anne that Rob had promised to make himself scarce that morning. She assumed that meant he would visit the Weinerts. They decided Christmas Eve and Christmas morning would be their own. Anne had blithely accepted Judith's invitation for Christmas dinner at the main ranch without even thinking Cord might disagree. He said nothing.

The two Bennett boys, Cord, and Rob were indeed desecrating Sunday afternoons with poker games. Pete and Luke were enthralled at the prospects of the coming Christmas dinner. They proposed taking bets as to the ultimate winner of the inevitable confrontation. Rob questioned Cord. "What confrontation? What are they talking about?"

Cord concentrated on his cards, ignoring the question. He found the prospect bleak and wasn't drawn in by the boys' gleeful

anticipation.

Luke said, “Our Aunt Hannah is coming to visit for two weeks, and she’ll be there. When Anne and Aunt Hannah meet, there’s going to be fireworks.”

Pete added, “Aunt Hannah has a tongue the Army should rent - as a weapon.”

“And Cord’s her favorite target.” Joyful anticipation was all over Luke’s face. “Can you imagine what your sister’s going to do when Aunt Hannah starts in? I figure less than five minutes from introduction to explosion.”

Rob had indeed matured a lot lately. After another quick look at Cord, he began studying his own hand carefully and dropped the subject.

Other than the dinner at Frank’s, Cord was looking forward to Christmas like a small boy. It seemed impossible that anything could be as good as he remembered from the year before, but it was. It was better.

They brought Reynard to town the morning of Christmas Eve, hitched him with Leona’s own harness to her newly refitted buggy at Ephraim’s, and drove to the Wells house. As promised, there was no sign of Rob. Leona was ecstatic. For the first time Cord saw signs of Anne’s spirit in her mother. After two blocks through town at a jerking all out gait, he could take no more. Leona’s Christmas present was going to have to include a few driving lessons.

“But, Cord, dear, it’s no fun to go so slow.”

“More fun for the horse than all that whip waving and rein slapping.”

In the end they went to an empty field, he designated certain rocks and trees as markers, and showed her how to do smooth turns and stops and starts. “I suppose I do see how aiming for such - precision - is an advantage.”

“Mm. Not only that, you won’t tip over and crush my wife and your grandchild.”

A quick check on Anne in the back showed her holding on for dear life, sliding from one side of the seat to another around the corners, and having a grand time. Now she leaned over his shoulder, raising her voice to be heard over the sounds of the horse’s hooves and buggy wheels. “I’d have warned you, but I forgot what it was like. Mother always drove like this. Mollie just got used to rushing everywhere.”

They spun back through town, Leona driving and speeding up again, waving and halloing to everyone she saw whom she knew. The two women laughed gaily, and Reynard was decked out in flowing red and green ribbons from foretop to tail. Cord tugged his

hat down so low he could barely see. It was as embarrassing as hell - and fun. They unhitched and put the horse up in his new home in the little barn behind the Wells house and headed in for coffee, Leona hugging them both like a happy child.

They surprised Rob hunched over coffee at the kitchen table. He stood uncertainly, discomfited by the daggers in his sister's glare, and quickly disappeared.

Anne said, "I thought he'd be over at Weinerts' or something."

Leona said, "Actually, dear, I don't think your brother will be seeing any more of Miss Weinert."

"Why?"

"I have no idea. He won't tell me."

"Hmp. He probably did something outrageous, like tried to kiss the prim little bitch."

"Anne!" Leona gasped.

"Mother, have you noticed that whenever I say something like that you have a ladylike conniption, and when my husband says something twice as bad, you smile indulgently?"

"Well, no, dear, I haven't."

"Strange. Everyone else for twenty miles in all directions has."

Leona smiled at them both. She looked more like her daughter all the time Cord thought.

Christmas Eve was one of things even better than he remembered. Of course, this year when Anne turned her face up towards him in the light of the candles on the tree he had no reservations about kissing her thoroughly.

He asked, "Next year will we need a fence around the tree? Because of the baby, I mean."

"No, I don't think so. The year after that will be a problem, I think."

Year after next. Last year he had hoped for another few months with her. Now he could really believe in year after next. He felt a fleeting pity for every other man in the world.

ANNE HAD MADE THE SUITING material she had bought in Denver into a black suit for Cord that looked every bit as good as she had imagined. So did the snowy white shirt that went with it. The suit and shirt weren't his Christmas present this year, though. A black Stetson and silver hatband were. Leona had also given him a silver belt buckle, and as they dressed for Christmas dinner with the Bennett family, Anne could tell he was half-embarrassed by the abundance of finery.

He had given Anne a brooch made especially for her, a gold tigress with eyes of silver. Armand LeClerc's sketches that were part

of the present enchanted Anne as much as the pin itself. Armand had started by copying a drawing of a tiger from a book and worked from that until he came up with a version that was feminine and yet still obviously a tiger.

She had modified a dark green dress with white lace inserts to fit over her expanding waistline, and looked at Cord shyly when she was all dressed.

"Do you like it?"

"You look like you should be going to some palace for dinner with a prince, not to Frank's with me."

Anne looked at him, considering. "Come here." She took his hand and pulled him over in front of the mirror on top of the bureau. "Look."

He did stare into the mirror, but at her, not himself. "You look grand, Annie."

"Not me. You. Us."

He looked again and so did Anne. She was more than a little pleased at what she saw. Her color was still high from his outrageous compliments, and all the work she had done on her dress had been worthwhile. Sometimes she even admitted to herself she saw glimpses of what made some friends insist she had a glow to her these days. And Cord! No matter what his sister might say about black suit and white shirt, he looked so handsome she was glad the only other women who would see him today were family. His eyes met hers in the mirror. Warm, light brown eyes that reflected nothing but love.

After a quiet moment, he said, "All right, I see it. We kind of fit, don't we?"

"Kind of. Tiger and Tigress."

Anne turned in his arms for a kiss then hid her face against his shoulder. "I was wrong to accept the invitation without asking you, wasn't I? They're all sure there's going to be another terrible scene, and I'm going to ruin Christmas for everyone, aren't they?" She pulled out of his arms and went and sat on the bed. "Maybe you should go and visit with them a while and I should stay here. You can tell them I don't feel well. They'll believe that."

Cord leaned back against the edge of the bureau, crossed his arms, and gave her a hard look. She'd been fussing over their clothes and everything else to do with this visit for weeks. Now she looked like a child offering a friend her only piece of candy and claiming she didn't like sweets anyway.

He said, "What the hell have they been telling you about my sister?"

"Well, you know."

"No, I don't. Tell me."

"That her marriage was unhappy and it made her bitter and that she has a sharp tongue and you're her favorite target."

"Mm. You thought about what they're probably telling her about you?" She stared up at him, the dismay on her face almost comical.

"She had a damn good marriage for over twenty years - only the last few were bad. Maybe Jim Reading wasn't one of the strongest men ever born, but he was one of the nicest. They lived here on the ranch till I was more than half grown, you know."

Anne shook her head.

"She goes at me about the same as Frank, and for about the same reasons. Whatever the whole bunch of them have been telling her ever since she got here will have her wondering, and when Hannah wonders, she comes up with better answers than Frank or Eph.

He walked over and sat next to her on the bed. "Martha wasn't the only one who mothered Marie and me, you know. After my mother died, Hannah did a lot of the comforting. She bandaged cuts and scrapes, nursed us through sicknesses and did most of the schooling. Hannah was the one figured out how I felt after the Hatch business - the whole family almost bankrupted themselves to buy me out of that mess. Said when I had children of my own I'd understand - everything wouldn't have been too much."

He rubbed her swollen belly gently. "Took a long time, but I understand now what she meant. There's no reason you shouldn't like each other, Annie. You're both pretty likable."

"You don't mind that she scolds?"

"Doesn't curse as bad as Frank or Eph."

She gave him a real smile then, and he knew he'd accomplished his purpose.

Anne hugged him. "All right, Dr. Bennett, you've fixed me. Let's go meet your sister."

ANNE STILL FELT A LITTLE nervous as Cord drove to the main ranch. He didn't stop near the entrance to the house but in front of the barn. He got out and opened the big doors and closed them again after she drove Willie inside.

Anne wore a hooded gray wool cape. As he helped her down from the buggy, Cord said, "We may never get to the house the way you look in that hood thing."

Seconds later Anne had lost track of where they were and why they were there. The strong December wind made the loose barn doors creak and groan so loudly sounds of the doors actually

opening and closing were lost. She might not have caught the slight sound of a cleared throat either, but Cord stiffened and straightened instantly.

Still slightly dazed from the kiss, Anne turned in his arms to see Luke and Pete leaning one on each side of the barn doors, grinning like a matched pair. Luke was as irreverent as ever. “Gosh, Anne, hasn’t anybody told him he can stop bothering with that kissing and hugging stuff until after the baby comes?”

The two of them always made Anne feel like laughing, but she tried not to show it. “No, and if you convince him of any such thing I’m going to stop practicing my shooting on inanimate objects and take up animate ones.”

Pete’s grin was fading as he eyed his uncle nervously. “We just came to hurry you along because Aunt Hannah’s about to chew the front door down she’s so eager to meet you. Next time we’ll knock or something.”

Anne felt Cord relax finally. He let her go and headed for Willie to start unhitching. “Might not do much good. World kind of narrows down sometimes.”

For once his nephews had enough sense to let a subject go.

Luke said, “We’ll unhitch and put the horse up. If you don’t get in the house soon, she’s going to knock Pa and Uncle Eph out for trying to keep her from coming out here to get you herself.”

The two got busy without waiting for permission, and with a final glare Cord put an arm around Anne and led her towards the house.

Anne and Cord were only just inside the door when Luke and Pete came in, out of breath from racing across slippery, frozen ground Cord had guided Anne across carefully. They weren’t going to miss anything if they could help it.

Luke said, “Wow, Anne, you look like a Christmas jewel. You look fantastic, really.”

Pete added, “Cord you don’t look like a rancher, you look like a *rich* rancher. Where’d you get that buckle? Is the hatband a Christmas present?”

Their boisterous enthusiasm left Anne breathless with laughter by the time she was introduced to Hannah. Hannah Bennett Reading was a strong-looking woman with dark blonde hair barely touched with gray and bright blue eyes. She favored Frank in her looks and greeted Anne with a female version of Frank’s best smile.

Martha was the one who had admitted to Anne how much concern there was in the family over Hannah’s visit. Anne thought that Martha might even have told her the story in hopes that she would decide to avoid the family Christmas dinner. Martha also

confided that Judith was irritating the whole family with her unshakable conviction that everything was going to be just fine. She emphasized the gravity of the situation by reporting that Frank and Judith had quarreled over it. Evidently that was a rare event, although Anne privately thought anyone married to Frank Bennett ought to be in a constant state of war.

After her introduction to Hannah, Anne went along to the kitchen with the other women, noting Martha's worried frown. As she began helping with the last of the dinner preparations, Anne answered Hannah's probing questions with good nature, buoyed by Cord's words before they left home and the kiss in the barn. Soon Hannah finished her rather gentle questioning and left the kitchen, murmuring something about "a chat with Cord."

Martha had a tight look on her face as she watched Hannah disappear through the doorway. She said, "As soon as she realized Judith and I don't agree with Frank and Ephraim about you, she stopped listening to us. She's always said I have no ability to see any of my own except through a mush-minded haze of emotion."

Martha did not often sound cranky. Anne looked at her with surprise. "She must have a way with words all right. But she can't say that about Judith."

Judith turned from the stove and said, "The whole family has been saying that about me lately - since I began to agree with Martha."

Anne asked curiously, "When did you begin to agree with Martha?"

Judith told her. Anne was amazed. "He never told me!"

"He was worried about what I might do when it happened, but later - he's embarrassed that I caught him so we're pretending it never happened."

Anne grinned at her sisters-in-law. "Luke and Pete caught us kissing in the barn, and he wasn't embarrassed. He was angry." She sobered then, feeling almost wistful. "Do you think he'll ever get over that?"

Martha's unhappy look had been replaced by her more usual calm, pleasant expression. "My dear, he's already having trouble hiding how he feels about you. It's only a matter of time until he realizes he doesn't have to hide it." Then she said, "Now tell me why you're here with us instead of off defending him from Hannah."

Anne managed an innocent look and said, "He says he doesn't need defending. His sister is a nice woman and I'm going to like her and she's going to like me, and there isn't going to be any fuss."

Anne didn't miss the look of absolute triumph Judith gave Martha, or Martha's rueful headshake in response. The three of them

continued working in friendly silence, Anne refusing to show concern.

After the greetings in the hall, Cord sat on a small sofa in what the family called the "great room." Huge, high ceilinged, with a floor of plain pine boards and pine paneling, the room could have seemed cold and stark. However, brightly colored braided rugs on the floor and wall decorations of cowhide, branding irons, and spurs gave it a casual warmth.

The rest of men in the family stood in a group on the other side of the room, as far from Cord as they could get. The tension was so thick, Cord almost wished he had something at hand he could drop on the floor just to watch them jump. They were all waiting for Hannah, and they all knew it.

What Cord told Anne before they left home was the truth, but it was an incomplete truth. When he returned from New Mexico he didn't see his sister until after the Boggs fight, and until after Frank and Ephraim gave Hannah their version of that fight. The first time he saw his sister after over six years, she walked up to him, slapped him hard, and said, "I never thought I'd live to see the day I'd be ashamed of you, but I am ashamed."

Cord walked out of Ephraim's house that day without a word and in the years since had avoided Hannah with great skill whenever she visited. On the few occasions she caught him, she subjected him to increasingly vituperative attacks in what he recognized was an attempt to provoke a reaction. Occasionally she succeeded.

Once he said, "You're turning into a viper-tongued shrew," before walking out.

Another time he had muttered, "A saint couldn't stand this," and left.

In the past weeks, however, Cord had given his sister some painful thought. Aside from the fact he was not letting Anne get in the middle of another emotional disaster, if he was now getting along with both his brothers fairly well it was more than time to stop being stubborn about Hannah. He was sure Hannah could be jolted out of the destructive pattern of their recent relationship if he wanted to make the effort. Surprisingly, he did want to. So now he waited, and it wasn't long.

Hannah's face was set in grim lines as she approached, and Cord didn't make the mistake of letting her get the first word in. "So, Hannah, how are you? Frank says things are better."

It was a jolt all right. Her face contorted, and she sat quickly on the sofa. After a long pause, she chose to respond to this ordinary conversation in the same way.

"I'm fine. Things *are* better. The store is doing better than ever now with Caroline's husband managing it."

Jim Reading's feed and implement store had always made a good profit, but he drank up and gambled away so much money those last years Frank had supported Hannah and her children, including Caroline's husband. Caroline was the oldest daughter. Cord let all that pass.

Hannah's mouth was trembling, but she had never been one to avoid hard truths. "Cord. Frank told me what you said - about that fight. If there was any way to take back that slap or the words…." She stopped, too emotional to continue.

"Guess you just did."

Hannah was still shaky, but she had her own rigid self-control. "And since you're sitting still for a minute, I've never thanked you for what you did about Carnes and those other gamblers. Ephraim's letter had no effect on them, and I was afraid to tell Frank the truth. Carnes caught Caroline alone one day and frightened her half to death. We never heard another word from any of them after the day you were there. It must have taken you at least a week, what with the ride down and back."

After Reading's death, Frank paid all the debts he considered legitimate. Three gamblers in the southern Colorado town had notes for huge sums, supposedly gambling debts, that didn't look right to Frank, and he refused to pay them. All three men continued to harass Hannah and her family, and Ephraim wrote each a letter, threatening legal action if they didn't stop.

Cord overheard Frank and Eph discussing it one day and his assessment of the situation had been correct - gambling men weren't going to back down over a gentle threat like Ephraim's, and if Frank lost his temper and got involved there was liable to be killing. Cord had a quiet talk with Riley and then disappeared for eight days, riding south and spending a few minutes with each of the three men in turn. It never occurred to him that Hannah would find out.

"What makes you think I had anything to do with your gamblers?"

"A friend of mine saw you go into one saloon. You're rather distinctive, you know. You and that big ugly horse you insist on riding. There was never another threat after that day."

Cord ignored the slight to Keeper. "Your friends know about me?"

"You don't seriously think a woman who has a brother who can throw a knife accurately over a distance most men can't handle with a pistol doesn't boast occasionally, do you?"

He made no response, so Hannah made her last confession of

the day. “I don’t like admitting I’m wrong any more than anyone else, but I have to tell you after all my assertions to the contrary, you look very distinguished in that suit.”

Cord felt a strong surge of the old affection for this sister. “Yeah, I do, don’t I?”

Hannah relaxed too. “Now tell me the truth about this wife of yours. She seems like a rather delightful creature, but Frank and Ephraim have told me some of the strangest stories.”

“Mm. They’ve been telling her stories too. Had her so scared of you I had to talk her out of staying home today.” Cord felt nothing but the purest pleasure at the trouble he knew these words would cause his brothers. He basely hoped she raked them over coals for hours.

Hannah stiffened perceptibly. “Well, I’m going to have to have quite a talk with those two, but that can wait. Did she really run them out of the old house with a gun the first time they tried to visit you?”

“Ran them out all right. Sounds like they left out a few details. After dinner why don’t you ask her to tell you the whole story of how we got married? She makes a good tale of it. Bet Martha and Judith never heard it all either.”

“All right, I will. How about her - assault - on Ephraim?”

“That. Her father hired some thugs. Supposed to beat me up and drag her home. When it got down to the last one Frank and Eph got in the usual panic about me beating the fool to death and started talking about stopping me with a gun. Eph was holding Anne to keep her out of it. She’d have been right in the middle trying to help otherwise.”

Hannah nodded. Frank and Ephraim had probably told her a fairly accurate version of the story, just put their own twist on things.

“She thought they were going to shoot me. If she’d understood what they were talking about it wouldn’t have made any difference. She’s not in favor of having my skull split with a rifle butt either. So she kneed Eph, ran out, pulled me off. I got mad, grabbed her and drug her over to Eph and reamed him out for letting her go.

“I kind of noticed he was red in the face and hunched over at the time but didn’t pay much mind. If you’d been there you’d have been laughing so hard you couldn’t stand. Best part was when she apologized. Said she only gave him ‘a little tap.’”

Hannah did laugh at this. Enjoying the conversation thoroughly now, she asked about the last incident. “Luke and Pete claim you told them she beat you once. Pounded your back with her fists.”

His nephews were overdue for a hard lesson in discretion Cord

thought. Then again, there was no harm telling Hannah as much as he'd told Luke and Pete. "Yeah, she did. I turned my back on her once too often."

"So what did you do?"

"Turned around."

She laughed a second time, then leaned forward and kissed his cheek and hugged him. "Well, dear, one thing I know already. That woman has to have something to do with the fact you're sitting there looking like a cat with cream on his whiskers, and I'm going to love her like a daughter even if she pounds on me." She went back to the kitchen then, smiling broadly.

Before any of the incredulous witnesses summoned the courage to approach him, Judith came to announce dinner was ready, and Anne was on her heels. She sat next to him, alight with pleasure.

"You were right. She's very nice. I do like her." She tipped her head at him in the way that begged for a kiss. "Did she yell at you? We didn't hear anything in the kitchen."

"Nope. Got myself some more hugging and kissing."

"Really? Maybe Frank and Ephraim said nice things about us after all."

"Sure, babe, maybe they did."

Frank was giving Judith a thorough kiss across the room under some greenery the family called mistletoe, and Cord found himself wondering why he couldn't just use the same excuse. Or carry her into an empty room and finish what they'd begun in the barn. He decided against it, and they started sedately for the dining room, but he couldn't think of one good reason why he couldn't - or why he shouldn't.

* * *

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Chapter 47

FRANK AND EPHRAIM HAD BOTH been born in February, about a week apart, so the family always had one big celebration. This year the day chosen was the day of the town's Valentine's Day dance. There would be dinner and cake at Ephraim and Martha's, and then the Bennett clan would attend the dance.

More than seven months pregnant, Anne felt shy about the party and dance. Perhaps she was not yet waddling, but she was feeling heavy and less than graceful. Any excuse at all was enough for Cord to refuse to let her take the two-hour buggy ride to town. He was coddling her so mercilessly it was often hard not to laugh at him, but in the end she took the time to alter another of her Chicago dresses. It was a deep blue-gray velvet, and eliminating the bustle provided enough extra material for a fit. The February day was cloudless with no wind and unseasonably warm, providing Cord no reason not to make the trip. Riley would take care of their stock or send someone.

Dinner was congenial. The cake was a scrumptious success. Not until after the feast did the Bennett men struggle into suits and ties, and the women put on their fancy dresses for the dance.

Cord and Anne dressed in the little bedroom Martha had assigned to them again. Her excuse was that after all these years it was fitting that Gil and Martin do the sleeping on the floor from now on, but Judith gave a knowing smile as Martha spoke the words.

Assurances as to how nice she looked did not lessen Anne's worries about attending a dance this heavy with child. She could not even finish buttoning the back of her dress. Cord made her feel better when he unbuttoned instead of buttoning three times, but it was his words when they were a little apart from the others on the walk to the town hall that reassured her completely.

"You know, Ti-gress, it's a good thing the whole town's afraid of me, or the men would riot when they saw you tonight."

"Do you lay awake nights thinking of things to say to make me feel good?"

"Lay awake a lot lately. That baby kicks like a wild man."

It was, of course, a son day. Even if they didn't mention it for a week, he always knew. And he could avoid the baby's kicking merely by pulling away from her in the night but was too pleased with the whole process to do anything of the sort.

By the time they got to the hall Anne was beaming. She could dance only the slow dances, but dance she did. People seemed to be

stopping by where Cord relaxed in a chair quite frequently whether she was gone or there. As Martin escorted her back towards Cord, the crowd hid him from view until they were on top of him - and Rob. Anne stopped dead barely aware of the polite words Martin spoke before disappearing.

Her brother rose uncertainly to his feet and started to turn away, then visibly straightened and faced her again. “I don’t suppose you’d dance with me if I asked.”

“Why don’t you ask and find out?”

“May I have the honor of the next dance - the next slow dance?”

“Yes.”

Suddenly Cord decided he was thirsty and headed for the punch bowl. She glared at his retreating back. Drat him.

“Can we talk? Until the next slow dance?”

Seating herself, she turned slightly on the chair to face him. “All right, Rob, we’ll talk.”

“You have to know how sorry I am. How ashamed I am that I ever….”

“I do know that. But it’s over, isn’t it? How do you feel now?”

“You know I’ve been seeing him.”

“Luke and Pete tell all.”

Rob told her then how Cord had simply shown up at the Wells house one Sunday afternoon, how he asked Rob if he would help with a Christmas present for Leona. “I told him I didn’t think you’d go along, but he said we’d only do it if you agreed, and he thought you would.”

Cord turned up again unexpectedly with Pete and Luke the next Sunday. Rob had been invited to Weinerts’ for a formal dinner that night and was home alone at loose ends. They had indeed played poker. “I kind of liked him anyway, you know. I just couldn’t admit it even to myself because - well, you know why. That Sunday….” Rob gazed across the room, seeing something not there but inside himself. “I haven’t had so much fun since I was a little kid, Anne. The teasing, the stories. They’re so different from us, from our family. It made me start to think.”

“Is it because of us you aren’t seeing Nancy Lee any more?”

“Yes and no. They never said anything about you when I was around. They acted like I didn’t have a sister. Then that same night after we played poker the first time, there I was. They had a lot of guests and some of them started in about you, about him. They didn’t say anything as bad as I said myself, nowhere near it. It wasn’t that. It was….” He struggled to find words. “I thought Weinerts were everything I wanted. That’s the way I wanted to live,

to be, and all of a sudden I was looking around and comparing how, how *pompous* they were with the way the Bennetts were that afternoon. I can't be like the Bennetts, and I know it, but I don't want to be like the Weinerts - or like Father either. There has to be something in between for me. Maybe not, but at least I'm going to look around a little and see. So I have to admit, it wasn't that what they said made me so angry I flew off the handle or anything. I did what I did because I knew it would end it with Nancy Lee, and I wanted out."

He told them he couldn't understand why they felt that way about his brother-in-law. He admired Cord and hoped he and Nancy Lee could spend as much time with his sister and her husband as possible.

"You should have seen the looks on their faces. Mr. Weinert puffed up like a toad and said I had to promise never to even introduce Nancy Lee to *that man*. I said I couldn't do that, and that was the end of it." Rob looked away across the dance floor. "Does that make you angry? I used him to get out of any commitment to her."

"No, I never liked the thought of you married to her. It didn't seem fair to wish you on somebody *nice*, but I wanted somebody better for you anyway."

Rob met her eyes again. "Maybe by the time I get around to it again you'll think I deserve somebody nice. The way Luke and Pete analyze every girl in town, I ought to be able to figure something out."

They waited, smiling slightly, for a few minutes until a slow dance began and walked out to the floor. After the dance ended, they were almost back to where Cord was again waiting when Rob stopped to give her a hug, then started and pulled away as if he'd been burned. "What on earth was that?"

"That's your nephew. He's getting quite rambunctious lately."

He was looking at her stomach as if it had just sprouted wings. Anne could feel an embarrassed flush starting.

"I didn't know they did that." He forced his curious gaze back to her face. "Anne, I'm glad…."

She gave him a quick kiss, "I believe you. Now go look for your nice girl." As she sat down beside Cord, she said, "If you're smart, you won't act smug."

"Now, Annie, would I act smug?"

They watched the dancers stomp through a reel and a polka, and she heard his voice, very soft and deep. "What do you think would happen if you and I just walked out there and danced?"

There was no use trying to convince him of less than the truth.

“Well, a few people would leave. Walk right out of the hall. More would get off the dance floor and stand and stare.” She looked squarely at him then. “And everybody who matters would keep on dancing or watch and smile.”

There was no answer, and she decided he had changed his mind. When the first notes in a slow tempo came off Miss Maggie’s piano, she heard his voice again. “Dance with me, Annie?”

The lump in her throat almost but not quite kept her from answering. “I’d like that, love.”

Hand in hand they walked among the dancers. If their very presence didn’t scandalize, the way he pulled her close against him would. Not for the first time she pictured their child being born with a clear imprint of his father’s belt buckle somewhere on his small person. All night she had felt big and almost clumsy, but now the magic began again. From the summer until now, she had forgotten what it was like. She was light as air, graceful as a cloud floating across a summer sky. The power of him lifted her. Better music than Miss Maggie’s was in him, and it echoed in her heart.

Talking to friends near the punch bowl, Frank felt Ephraim’s hand on his shoulder, turning him. “Look.” They watched in silence. Several indignant couples hustled out of the hall. More left the dance floor with offended looks, but even as they left others took their places.

Noah Reynolds ignored Leona’s widow’s weeds, and she made no protest. When a fast look around showed Luke no girl he could count on, he hurried his sister Beth to the floor. The LeClercs, the Mileses, and surprise of surprises, the Stones, who had never before danced at a Mason social but occasionally deigned to drop by for a few minutes to grace an affair with their presence. In no time at all there were as many couples dancing as there had been. Frank felt Judith’s hand on his arm. “Should we?”

“No. I think when this is over you and Martha are going to get to say you told us so, and I’m going to stand here and watch and enjoy every minute of it. I think this might be something I’ve waited years to see.” Frank glanced sideways at his wife. “When are you going to tell me what happened last summer?”

Judith gave her serene smile. “Tonight, I think.”

The two tall blond men stood side by side, their wives’ arms tucked in theirs. Ephraim said, “He dances like he does everything else. He makes everybody else out there look clumsy.”

“Luke tells me lately half the girls he sees are curious about him.”

Ephraim laughed. “Too late. Even if they could get past the tigress, I don’t imagine anything else would interest him much.”

Whirling in Cord's arms, Anne was aware of nothing but the floating sensation and the eyes of gold so close to her own and so somber.

"You know, Annie, a long time ago an old man told me beauty doesn't mean much in a woman. It disappears with age. But he said some women have something better. They have a special glow that lasts all their life and just gets richer. You're like that. You really shine."

She could feel her eyes growing moist.

"Don't cry."

"I'm not."

Her hand slipped from his shoulder to his face without conscious thought. He rubbed his cheek lightly against her fingers and kissed her palm. The scandal would last a hundred years, she thought, and willed her hand back to his shoulder. The smile started then, a real smile, teeth flashing oh so white in his bronze face. Her heart soared, and in truth, that night Anne Wells Bennett was not the only one who saw beauty in her fierce, dark man.

* * *

About the Author

Ellen O'Connell lives in Douglas County, Colorado. She raised, trained, and showed National Champion Morgan horses for over twenty years as Serendipity Morgans. She still keeps a Morgan mare, Serendipity B Wichin, although she now concentrates on rally, carting, and drafting competition with her dogs. Eyes of Silver, Eyes of Gold is her second novel. Her website is www.oconnellauthor.com.

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Table of Contents

EYES OF SILVER, EYES OF
Chapter 1
Chapter 2
Chapter 3
Chapter 4
Chapter 5
Chapter 6
Chapter 7
Chapter 8
Chapter 9
Chapter 10
Chapter 11
Chapter 12
Chapter 13
Chapter 14
Chapter 15
Chapter 16
Chapter 17
Chapter 18
Chapter 19
Chapter 20
Chapter 21
Chapter 22
Chapter 23
Chapter 24
Chapter 25
Chapter 26
Chapter 27
Chapter 28
Chapter 29
Chapter 30
Chapter 31
Chapter 32
Chapter 33
Chapter 34
Chapter 35
Chapter 36
Chapter 37
Chapter 38
Chapter 39
Chapter 40

Chapter 41
Chapter 42
Chapter 43
Chapter 44
Chapter 45
Chapter 46
Chapter 47

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